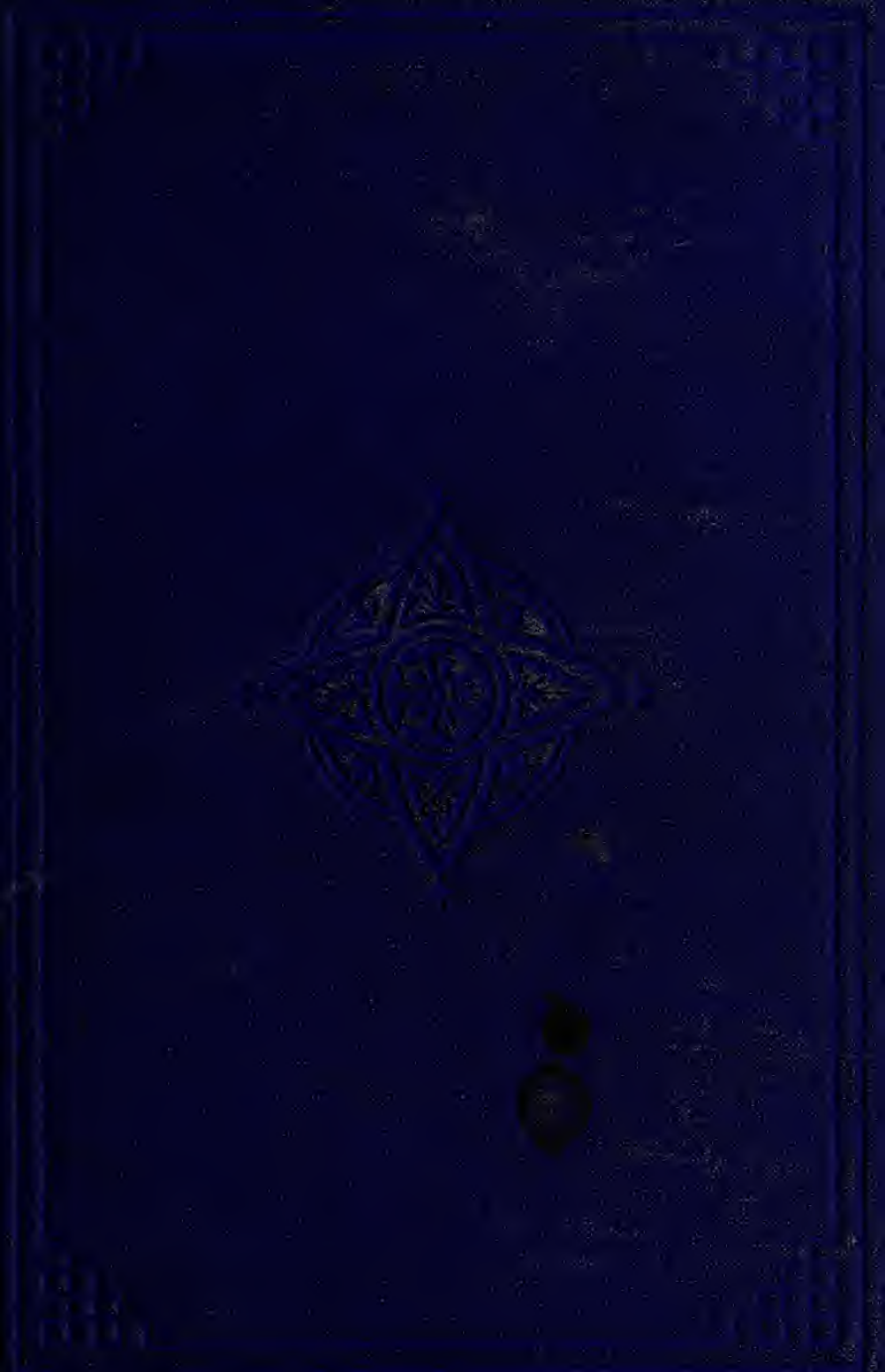

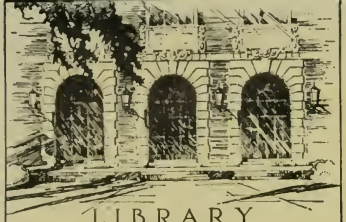

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WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT

(MRS. ROSS CHURCH),

AUTHORESS OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," "TOO GOOD FOR HIM."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

RACHEL'S NEW HOME.

Although Rachel Norreys was anxious to leave a house where she felt herself so much in the way as she had done at Mrs. Arundel's lodgings, yet, as soon as she was in the train again alone with Raymond, the same feeling of blankness and want of ease came over her that she had experienced when in his company before. And then, when she was left behind with him at Gibraltar, there had been a hope, however small, to comfort her, that of meeting her friends again in England. But she had come to England, and she had met them

(or one of them, at least), and she felt thoroughly disappointed at the result. Her hope seemed over—everything seemed over to the young impetuous creature as she leaned back in the railway carriage, which was fast conveying her to the house henceforward to be her home. As she did so, how sad were her thoughts! Every incident that had occurred to trouble her during the last few months seemed to pass in revision before her during that brief journey, and mock her with the irrevocability of its nature. Her father's death—her husband's return—the change in Elise—the loss of her poor old friend, Jack Arundel—and, above all, the weight of a secret which she bore alone—a secret which was bowing down her joyous nature—overclouding the brightness of her young life, making her shrink from others, and even from herself, as if she walked this earth a living lie. These were dangerous thoughts for Rachel to indulge in—doubly so, because her nature was quick, passionate, and determined; and her education had been such that recklessness with

her appeared no evil. Her temper, too, with all its normal brightness, was capable, under real or fancied wrong, of dark and sudden clouds, which dimmed its sweetness, and sometimes obscured her very reason. And as she leaned back in the railway carriage and thought upon these things, she was not sulky, but despondent; so much so that life in prospective appeared to have lost all its good for her, and her Maker His great attribute.

Raymond Norreys watched her in sad surprise. She had seemed at first so pleased to exchange Farnborough for Brompton, that he had almost hoped she had anticipated, however slightly, a return to his company; but now he felt he had deceived himself. Yet even smarting under this disappointment, and little things are hardest to bear with equanimity, Raymond let no symptom of such a feeling escape him by word or look. He allowed his wife to maintain her mood of reserve until he had placed her in his mother's carriage, which was waiting for them at the Waterloo Station, and then, as they commenced to

drive towards Abbey Lodge, he said to her, kindly and cheerfully—

"You found Mrs. Arundel better than you expected, did you not, Rachel?"

"Yes," she replied, "but it is all very miserable. I don't think she quite realizes her loss yet."

"I dare say not, poor thing," he answered; "you must have felt it too, dear Rachel, both for yourself and for her; but you will try not to let the recollection of it influence you when we arrive at home, will you? My mother is anxiously expecting her new daughter, and it would grieve her so to think you were not happy."

At this address Rachel tried to rouse herself and look more cheerful. She was very unhappy, but she was not selfish, and she felt that she owed something—a double debt, indeed, to the man who sat beside her. She raised herself from her languid position, settled her dress, and gave a slight smile, as she replied—

"What would she feel if she thought that you were not so, Raymond?"

"She cannot think it," he rejoined,

quickly, "because it is not the truth. My happiness lies in yours, Rachel. You have it all in your hands. Let me see you contented, and I wish for nothing more."

She turned her face towards the window, and dropped the conversation. She was always afraid to approach any but the most commonplace subjects when she was alone with her husband.

A few minutes more brought them to Abbey Lodge. Rachel remembered the old house and garden well enough, but the covered pathway had been an innovation of more modern date than her visit there.

"How very convenient," she said, as she alighted from the carriage, and prepared to traverse its protected length.

The remark was simple enough, but Raymond felt his foolish cheek grow hotter as he heard it; the smallest praise, the lightest commendation from those lips, for anything connected, however remotely, with himself, made a rebellious hope, which he was daily striving to crush down and destroy, leap like a living thing beneath his breast.

The meeting between the new relatives was commonplace enough, as such meetings under ordinary circumstances usually are. Perhaps Mrs. Norreys and her daughter did not feel disposed to welcome the young wife quite so warmly as they would have done had she returned, in the first place, to Abbey Lodge with her husband; but, if so, they were careful not to exhibit any inclination of the kind. On the contrary, their greeting was cordial, though constrained, as it ever must be when strangers meet as near connections. Mrs. Norreys' first idea, after kissing Rachel, and calling her "her daughter," was to commiserate her for having travelled in the heat of the day.

"I am afraid you must be quite knocked up, my dear; had you not better lie down for a short time before luncheon is served? I really should not have sent the carriage to the station if Raymond had not made so sure (from not hearing from you this morning) that you would return with him about this time."

"Well, mother, you see it is fortunate that you followed my advice," said Ray-

mond, "or I should have been obliged to rattle Rachel home in a cab, and that would have fatigued her still more. Are you very tired?" he added, addressing his wife.

"Not at all," she answered; "I am only dusty."

"You shall go to your room at once, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Norreys. "Christine, ring the bell, and desire Ellen to take up a jug of hot water to the Blue Room. Come, my dear Rachel, I will show you the way."

And then Rachel was forced to accompany her mother-in-law upstairs, and felt, for the first time on leaving the presence of her husband to go with a stranger, that she left behind her something that was becoming familiar to herself. The Blue Room was a very spacious apartment, with a most dignified-looking four-post bedstead in the centre of it, draped with ample blue hangings, and fitted with solid, old-fashioned mahogany furniture—the best spare room in the house, indeed, and that had been unused now for many a long day.

"I always resolved," said Mrs. Norreys, when Rachel made some remark upon the surrounding magnificence, "that when dear Raymond married, this room should be given up to his wife and himself, and be considered as their own. And so, my dear, remember," the old lady continued, patting her daughter-in-law kindly on the shoulder, "that, as long as you choose to inhabit it, it is yours. I shall be glad to see it tenanted again; for it has never been used (this with a profound sigh) since Raymond's poor dear father died. He was laid out on this very bed, and no one has ever slept in it since."

Rachel timidly glanced towards the piece of furniture indicated. With her nervous and susceptible imagination, she had the greatest dread of supernatural horrors, and had often made herself quite ill during her lifetime with encouraging foolish fancies and child-like fears. She almost shuddered now, although it was broad daylight, as she looked at the bed where Death had been, and her mother-in-law misinterpreted the doubtful glance.

"My dear child, you need not be afraid that it is damp. *I* have taken good care of that; and I hope you will let me know if everything is not just as you like it. Will there be enough blankets here, do you think?"

"Plenty, Mrs. Norreys," answered poor Rachel, whose feverish little body could seldom bear much clothing of any sort upon it. "Everything is very nice and comfortable, thank you."

"There are plenty of pillows for you," continued the mother-in-law, beating up the articles in question with pride as she spoke; "and if you do not want them all, I know Raymond will: he likes his head very high, doesn't he?"

But Rachel was busy removing her walking things, the warmth of which seemed to have heightened the colour in her face, and did not appear to have heard the last remark of her mother-in-law.

"You must look at the dressing-room, my dear, next," said Mrs. Norreys, as she dragged the wearied girl down a small flight of steps into a lesser room adjoining the sleeping apartment, and opening from

it. It was a very convenient dressing-room indeed, with a nice writing-table and sofa in it for Raymond's use, and another door which led out upon the corridor. But the young wife's praise was not so cordial as Mrs. Norreys had hoped for, as she pointed out the various arrangements which had been made for her husband's comfort.

"You see, Rachel, Raymond can come here whenever he wishes to write, or to be quiet, and free himself from the chatter of you girls,—though I don't suppose that will be often," added Raymond's mother, gazing with admiration upon the released tresses of chestnut hair which, having become disordered by the removal of her hat, were lying in heavy coils about the youthful shoulders of Raymond's wife.

But at last Rachel grew terribly weary of all this explanatory twaddle. Mrs. Norreys was excessively kind and attentive; but all the little details with which she entertained her fretted the girl's spirit, already chafed by the circumstances of the morning. She did not leave her for a minute; she accompanied her as she moved

from one side of the room to the other. She poured out the water in the basin, handed her the towel, drew down the window-blinds, and, finally, insisted upon her lying down upon the bed where Raymond's father had been laid out, and "taking a sleep" before the luncheon-bell was due. A sleep!—when every nerve in her body was twitching with thrice its usual rapidity,—when she could hear the pulsation of her heart, and scarcely count its beating. As this proposition was urged upon her, Rachel seemed almost ready to break down, and, with a faint remonstrance and a nervous movement of her mouth, she seated herself upon a chair, and Mrs. Norreys could see that she was trembling. The old lady could not understand the reason, but she saw the fact; and, thinking that her son might be the best doctor in the case, she said, hastily, "Well, my dear, I will leave you to do as you like," and thereupon vanished from the bedroom, and, seeking Raymond, told him that she thought his wife was a little nervous and upset from her journey, and that he had better go up stairs and see what his

presence would do for her. Alas! poor Raymond. He advanced a few steps into the passage, and then called Christine.

"Come with me, Chrissy," he whispered; "you women understand each other better than we men can do. Go in to Rachel and cheer her up. This is the commencement of the fulfilment of your promise to me."

"Will you not come also, Raymond?" she asked, in surprise, as he prepared to leave her at the bedroom door.

"No,—thanks, my little sister. You will get on better alone." And he entered his dressing-room as he spoke.

Christine first knocked at the door, then, upon being answered, opened it gently, and went in.

Rachel was sitting as her mother-in-law had left her, despondent and weary; but she raised her head, and tried to smile pleasantly as she saw the bright face of Christine by her side.

The sister of Raymond Norreys had a happy disposition, like his own. She was very warm-hearted, too, and unreserved, and ready to love those who had any claim

upon her. She advanced now without ceremony to Rachel, and, throwing her arms about her neck, exclaimed,—

"Dear Rachel, I hope that you will be happy amongst us. I feel as if I must love you, because you belong to Raymond; and you will learn to regard me as a sister also for his sake, will you not?"

The address was so honest, and the speaker appeared so much in earnest, that Rachel Norreys would have possessed a harder heart than she did to have passed it by in coldness. But she had a heart warm as Christine's own, and capable of far greater feeling, and the tenderness of her sister-in-law's words opened that wellspring of tears in her bosom which had been longing to overflow for the last hour. She returned the affectionate embrace; she tried to re-echo the sentiments, and give the necessary assurance to the question asked her; but something rose in her throat and choked her,—something that in another moment fell in a violent storm of rain upon the bosom of her new friend.

"Oh, Christine! will you really love me?

—*really, really?* I have so few left,—I am so utterly alone!"

It was a strange speech to fall from the lips of a bride returning to her husband's home. Through the closed doors between them Raymond caught the outspoken, vehement words, and bit his lips to hear them. But Christine only answered the first part of the appeal.

"Love you, dear Rachel! How can you doubt it, when we have been looking for your arrival so long? Of course we shall, for Raymond's sake as well as your own."

Ah! that clause repeated. What right had she (so Rachel rapidly mentally asked herself) to take the love they offered her for "Raymond's sake,"—for the sake of Raymond "whom she loved,"—whom she loved not,—whom she had told she never should love? Would it be honest in her, under false pretences, to accept the regard offered her so freely for the sake of the affection which she bore her husband, when she was no wife of his,—no daughter to Mrs. Norreys,—no sister to Christine,—when even the name she used she had no right

to? As these thoughts coursed themselves one after another through Rachel's mind, she gradually relaxed her encircling hold of Christine Norreys, dried the tears still lying on her wetted cheeks, and assumed altogether an air of less freedom, as if she remembered herself, and where she was.

"I have been very foolish, Christine. Pray forgive this outburst, and forget it. It is not a usual thing for me to 'carry my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at.'"

The quotation was not complimentary to her consoler, but the kind heart of Christine passed it over without comment.

"But here, dear Rachel!" she said; "you are at home, and can do as you like."

Oh, how Rachel longed to throw herself again upon that friendly bosom, and tell all her sorrow and its cause! But the same thought came into her head that had troubled it before, and laid a restraint upon her tongue.

"Yes, indeed," she said, rising and essaying to bathe her face and arrange her disordered hair, "after all the travelling I have had lately, it is quite pleasant to think

that I shall not have to move again. I hate board-ship—do not you? and railways also, for that matter."

Christine rose also with a sigh. She had thought her new sister was really going to make a compact of friendship with her; but the moment for confidence seemed to have passed as suddenly as it had arisen. She was sorry for the change in Rachel's manner for Raymond's sake; however, it was unreasonable to hope for anything more than every-day communications from her brother's wife, when she had not been in the house yet for more than an hour. The luncheon-bell soon after sending forth its clamorous invitation, brought the two girls down stairs to the dining-room, where they found Mrs. Norreys presiding over a very plentiful mid-day meal. Everything at Abbey Lodge was conducted on the good old-fashioned style, when in gentlemen's families there was no such thing as stint in any one particular, and nothing appeared on the table or about the house that was not the best of its kind. The silver was silver—heavy, solid, and greatly emblazoned; the

linen was damask, and woven by grandmothers and great-grandmothers of half-a-dozen generations back. The wine was old, and the servants knew their duties; and as everything spoke of comfort in the same degree, little more need be said upon the subject. The fact being, that Mrs. Norreys had the sense to prefer living within her income and enjoying the good things of this life without limit, to spending more money upon outside show and less upon indoor comfort.

But although there was no lack of luxury about Abbey Lodge, as far as eating, drinking, and living were concerned, another old-fashioned complaint had been inherited by Mrs. Norreys from her progenitors, which, although doubtless perfectly proper, is as doubtless exceedingly irksome to those people who have not been accustomed to it—I allude to a rigid punctuality being maintained on all matters appertaining to the household. Thus the prayer-bell at Abbey Lodge rang at eight o'clock every morning, summer and winter—the breakfast-bell at nine—that for luncheon and

dinner at one and six—for prayers again at ten, after which no one—mistress, guest, or servant—was expected to remain out of bed longer than was necessary to disencumber themselves of their mortal clothing. As Mrs. Norreys enlarged over the luncheon-table upon the above rules of her house, for the edification of her daughter-in-law, Rachel listened with dismay to the long, prosy details, and Raymond rightly read the expression of her face.

"All very judicious and proper, mother, I am sure," he said, laughing, "but you are positively frightening my wife with the strictness of your rules; I don't fancy she has been used to such early hours in Gibraltar; have you Rachel?"

"A life in foreign climates is generally a desultory one, my dear Raymond," replied his mother; "but Rachel is not in Gibraltar any longer now, and she will I am sure be quite ready to comply with the regulations of our establishment."

The tone was not unkind, but it was infinitely proper; and the undisciplined heart, for whose edification Mrs. Norreys was

holding forth, bounded with a feeling very akin to rebellion as it listened; but its owner had the sense to let it bound in silence.

After luncheon, exactly at three o'clock, the carriage was announced to be at the door.

"This is our hour for driving, my dear," said Mrs. Norreys; "you will accompany us?"

But here Rachel ventured to affirm that she was tired, and would rather stay at home; and her husband scorned the notion of a close carriage.

"No, thank you, mother, I stay with Rachel."

"Very well," said Mrs. Norreys, "it does not signify for to-day. Another time I hope your wife will be pleased to accompany Christine and myself in our afternoon drive."

And then Rachel knew that, hot or cold, wet or dry, that three o'clock drive would be a stereotyped matter of daily discussion between her mother-in-law and herself as long as she remained at the Abbey Lodge.

But her afternoon did not pass unpleasantly. She commenced to unpack her boxes, and Raymond actually ventured to put his head in at the bedroom door, and ask if he should help her, with such a pleasant face, and looking so anxious to be made of use, that she could not have repulsed him. And very useful he was, uncording heavy trunks and arranging their contents in her chest-of-drawers and wardrobe for her; and then having all the empty cases cleared away again, so that her bedroom looked quite home-like and comfortable before Mrs. Norreys and Christine had returned from their drive. And Rachel had sat in an arm-chair the meanwhile, and directed him where to place the various articles; and he had been amusing her with stories of boardship and sea life, until she was surprised to find herself laughing at his humorous fun, and feeling more cheerful than she had done for many a day past. And then, when her boxes were disposed of, he had brought in one of his own, and unpacked thence a number of the presents he had collected for her with so much care from the different

places he had visited abroad. As Rachel saw them laid out upon the bed, and thought how much they must have cost, and how their purchaser must have thought of her wherever he was, her pretty white teeth came firmly down upon her trembling lower lip, as she tried to keep back the tears she was too proud to let him see her shed at this proof of his affection for her. But, do what she would, she could not help comparing his faithful remembrance with her own utter disregard of his feelings, and she felt full of compassion for his wasted love, and of humility for her own shortcomings. He did not seem to perceive her mood however, but bundled his offerings out upon the bed, with the usual carelessness of men for finery, thinking little of them himself, and doubtful now, indeed, whether Rachel would think any more, since she could not value them for his sake. Such a miscellaneous heap, too, as appeared when at last they were all collected together.

There were articles in ivory and sandalwood from Hong-Kong; gauze dresses from Shanghai; carved peach-stone and mother-

of-pearl bracelets from Canton; birds of paradise and silver ornaments from Singapore; painted boxes from Burmah; inlaid boxes from Bombay; ostrich feathers from the Cape; coral and lace from Malta; and kind thoughts hovering over each article from everywhere. And when they lay piled upon the coverlet, fans, bracelets, boxes, and card-cases, in one confused mass, all the comment Raymond made upon them, was—

"There they are, Rachel! if you don't like them, throw them away." "Like my love," was in his heart, but he was too generous to say it. As the girl heard his words, she rose from her chair and approached the bed, to admire his offerings.

"They are beautiful; I never saw such a lot of pretty things together before. Thank you, Raymond, so much!" and her husband, being still in a kneeling position on the floor, she stooped and kissed him, as she would have kissed any intimate friend who had given her a present. But at her action the colour flew to the young man's face, and he rose hastily from his knees, saying:

"Don't do that again, child—for God's sake!" and left her, surrounded by her new acquisitions, as he spoke.

She was terribly hurt—no less by his words than his manner; and when they next met, felt twice as reserved towards him as she had done before; and he, for his part, seemed almost as if he were afraid that she would repeat the dose, or in some way allude to it. But they did not meet again until it was in the presence of his mother and sister.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT SHALL HER HUSBAND DO WITH HER?

The dinner passed off very agreeably, and excepting for this fresh reserve springing up between Raymond and herself, Rachel would almost have enjoyed her evening. A hint had been given to Mr. Alexander Macpherson not to make his appearance on that particular occasion, and so they were quite alone. When her husband had left her standing by that mountain of presents, refusing even the thanks she proffered for them, poor Rachel had felt terribly guilty. The same doubt which had attacked her in the morning with respect to the love of her mother and sister-in-law returned upon her now. What right had

she, who gave him nothing, to accept all this from Raymond? she, who had wounded his self-love and pride to that degree that he shrunk from her simple kiss as if she were some poisonous thing to sting him. These offerings had been collected for his wife—not for her, who was a dependant on his bounty. As this last thought struck for the first time the girl's proud heart, her delicate nostrils dilated, her breath came quick and hard, and she tapped the ground repeatedly with her impatient foot. It was a bitter truth for a pride like Rachel's to swallow; but she felt it to be truth; and from the hour that it struck home to her heart, she almost loathed the bread she eat and the clothing that she wore.

"I *cannot* wear those dresses," she thought. "I am thankful they are coloured; Christine can take them. Did I attempt to put them on, and parade their bravery to the world, they would drop off me where I stood, and reveal me as I am—a fraud! a cheat! a subterfuge! Does Raymond think that I am a beggar, that he thrusts these gifts upon me, and will take no thanks?

Why even a beggar thanks for what he asks for, and I did not ask for these. Heaven knows I ask for nothing. Oh, thank God, my father's dead!" And for the moment that remembrance drove out all others from her mind.

"I cannot keep these things," she said at last, decisively though, to herself. "They were not bought for me; I feel I have no claim to them. If Christine will not, at the least share them, I shall do what he suggested, throw them on one side."

And so, after the dinner was removed, and she found herself for a moment alone in the drawing-room with her husband, she said to him, hurriedly, and with an evident effort:—

"Raymond, may I share the things you gave me with Christine? There are too many for me, and you should give your sister something;" and he had answered almost as hurriedly—

"Do just as you like with them, Rachel; they are yours to keep, or give away;" and then, as if fearful his words appeared cold, he added, with an appearance of greater interest, "Christine will doubtless be

pleased if you give her some of them; she is disposed to think very kindly of you already.

"Thank you, Raymond," she replied, and resolved that her sister-in-law should choose what she most admired from the mass, and that the rest should be put safely away under lock and key, until she felt she had a better claim to them than now.

"And if that time never arrives for me," she said to herself, "some one may come after me for whom it may; for if this kind of thing goes on for long, I believe that it will kill me, and I hope," she added passionately, "that it may."

Christine re-entered the drawing-room, bearing with her the guitar-case which her brother remembered to have seen amongst his wife's luggage. The instrument had been placed in it by other hands than Rachel's, for she had never seen, and scarcely thought of it, since the evening she had sung to it last, at Mrs. Arundel's. The sight of it brought back many a painful memory to her heart; but she was getting

used to such trials now, and bore them better than she had done.

"See what I have found, Rachel," exclaimed her sister-in-law, as she advanced towards her. "Raymond pleads guilty to total ignorance of whether you sing or do not sing, and refers me to yourself for an answer; but I think this case is a better solver of the question than either of you."

"If it is not empty," said Rachel, quietly.

"We will soon settle that matter," replied Christine, "for I took the liberty of having it opened for you. There, what is that?" she asked triumphantly, as she lifted the lid of the case, and held aloft Rachel's guitar, with all its strings flown and hanging helplessly down from the frets.

Something in its desolate aspect touched poor Rachel more than the sight of itself had done. She took it from the hands of Christine as if it had been a living creature, and the tears rose in her eyes, and dropped thence upon the disabled instrument as she busied herself in restringing it. Raymond perceived the effect it had upon her, and

spoke to his sister as if it was all her fault.

"What the deuce do you mean, Christine, by bringing things here before you are asked for them?"

Poor Christine was dreadfully taken aback by this reproof; her brother had never spoken to her like that before, and she thought she had done such a clever thing in finding the guitar-case. Rachel saw her discomfiture, and hastened to relieve it. Good heavens! was she to be the means of disturbance to more members of this family than one?

"It is not of the slightest consequence, Raymond," she said, firmly. "I am very glad to see my guitar again, and very much obliged to Christine for bringing it, only I have not sung to it since, since—"

She did not finish her sentence, but her hearers could guess the rest.

"Oh! forgive me, dear Rachel," exclaimed Christine, "and let me put it back into its case. Another night, when you are stronger—"

"I shall never be strong enough to think

of him without pain, Christine. I would rather sing at once, thank you; it is only the first effort that is trying."

And Raymond could not help, as he listened to her, wondering at and admiring the strong courageous spirit which reigned in so tender a breast. When she had tuned her guitar, and placed her fingers on the strings, the first chords they appeared naturally to form were those of the little song she had sung by the request of her friend Elise, on the evening she touched it last, "La Desolazione," and she commenced to sing it. The nature of the song has been described before, and it lost none of its pathos from the interpretation which Rachel's saddened feelings put on it to-night.

Christine, whose musical tastes had been (like all other branches of her education) most scrupulously superintended, and who had not been permitted to have any but the most innocent of songs in her portfolio, was positively enchanted by the combined effect which the wild passionate words of "La Desolazione" and the strains of the

guitar had upon her. The tears were standing in her bright dark eyes as Rachel concluded, and the first thing she said was, "Oh! do sing it again!" And when it was ended for the second time, she turned to Raymond and exclaimed—

"Isn't it lovely, Raymond?"

"Yes; I like it very much," he replied.

He was very susceptible to the influence of music, particularly just at that time, when his spirits were feigned, and he had felt his wife's singing more than he chose to express.

Rachel thought she must say something in reply to this joint approval of her efforts, and so she remarked—

"I think the words are particularly well adapted to the music," and commenced repeating them :—

"'Ritorna, ch'io t'amo, mio primo sospir.
Ritorna, ch'io bramo, vedertie morir!'"

"What are they in English?" asked Raymond; I do not understand Italian."

"Oh, you goose!" laughed his sister; "they only mean—

"'Return, thou that I love, my first aspiration.'

(I suppose 'aspiration' would be the word, Rachel?)

"'Return, that I may embrace, see thee, and die!'"

Now, what do you think of them?"

"I am no judge," he replied, with a touch of bitterness in his tone. "I have had very little experience of such pressing invitations. I don't suppose people often feel what they sing." And as he spoke, Rachel felt her face crimson with shame at the unintentional reproach, for she knew that he was thinking that very little pathos or passion had been breathed into her longings for his return, whatever her songs might imply. Raymond seemed absent after this little episode, and as if he were wrapt in his own thoughts; and when Mrs. Norreys rejoined her daughters, he rose and sallied forth into the night air, no one knew whither.

The evening went slower after his departure. Rachel sung several more songs, and Christine gave a specimen of her skill upon the piano; and then wine and biscuits appeared, and after that the bell rang for evening prayers, and still the son of the

house had not returned. His mother fidgetted at his absence, and wondered at the reason; but Rachel thought that she could guess it plainly enough. However, the bedtime of the inhabitants of Abbey Lodge was never deferred, whoever was from home, and therefore, as soon as prayers were over, Mrs. Norreys and Christine handed Rachel a candlestick, and, taking up their own, bade her an affectionate goodnight.

"The man-servant has been directed to sit up until Raymond comes in, my dear," remarked the former, as she saluted her daughter-in-law; "in the meanwhile, let me advise you not to permit his delayed return to keep you from your natural rest. Benson, turn off the gas." And thereupon the staid and immoveable Benson, with habitual dexterity, caused the whole house, in the course of a minute, to be wrapped in darkness, so that if any one had had a fancy to stay in the sitting-room for a little while longer, they could not have indulged it. But Rachel was thankful for her husband's absence, and flew to her own room,

lest she should encounter him again before she had gained its sanctuary. There, by the aid of a pair of tall wax candles, all looked cheerful enough, and she sat for some time thinking over the events of the day, which seemed so many in the retrospect. Presently she heard the hall-door open, and Raymond's footsteps ascending the staircase. He passed her door, and entered the dressing-room, closing his own after him gently, and turning the key. Rachel breathed freer when she heard him do so, although she felt an unaccountable longing just to be able to peep through the door which separated them, to see how he conducted himself—whether his face looked sad, and what he was going to do next. If she had had her wish, much of her prejudice against him would have melted away in womanly compassion for the hurt she had inflicted, and no other could heal. Raymond Norreys had entered his room softly, that his wife might not hear him, and then, taking off his coat and waistcoat, he had thrown himself into a chair, and lying back in it, had crossed his arms upon

his breast and given himself up to thought. As he permitted it to have the dominion over him, an observer might have seen, from the violent and sudden changes that passed over his features, from the knitted brow, the compressed lips, the weary, languid eyes, and the heavy sighs which occasionally escaped him, that the demon that had gotten possession of him was by no means a welcome or a pleasant guest. In truth, Raymond Norreys was considering, now that he had brought the woman he called his wife under the protection of his mother's roof-tree, what on earth he was to do with her. This man was no fool—no weak, love-sick idiot, to be content to fawn all his life upon a girl who did not care for him, without expecting or hoping for a return. He had loved the child whom he had married with more than a boy's love; he had nourished and fostered during many years a passion for the creature of his imagination, which, since he had met her again, instead of dissolving itself into thin air, had seemed to grow, out of her very coldness, more vehement every day. But

he felt that he had placed himself in a humiliating position by the agreement he had entered into with his wife; he doubted whether he had done his suit any good by that agreement; whether, in a woman's eyes, it might not have appeared to be simplicity, indifference, or a want of determination, instead of an offspring of the generosity from which it emanated. As Raymond bred this doubt, he grew impatient with himself. He had pandered to none of these; he knew it well. He had every qualification that a man ought to possess; and it had been an innate sense of chivalry which had grown up with him, a great idea of the unequal strength between the sexes, of the consideration due to a woman, especially one who possessed both youth and beauty: it was these feelings alone which had made him so gentle with her. He had passed his word to Rachel that he would never claim her as his wife until she came of her own free will and told him that she loved him. Suppose she never so came. At the bare idea the young man started in his chair and ground his teeth

together. He had gained a little more insight into her character since that first interview: she was very thin-skinned and sensitive, he could see that — proud as Lucifer—and determined as well as proud. Suppose her pride should never permit her to come forward and make such an avowal; —it was a great trial to have imposed upon one so organized as Rachel. He could not go dangling all his life after her, acting the part of cloak-bearer, cup-bearer, purse-bearer—in fact, to be her walking-stick, and nothing more. He was proud as well as herself, and the thought galled him. But then this girl possessed something else beside pride; something which could subdue her pride—than which nothing else would —and that was, the capability of loving. No one could help seeing it who saw anything. It flashed out of her liquid, speaking eyes; it hung upon her ripe, tremulous mouth; it made itself known in the sensitiveness of her nervous little hand; in the sudden flushing of her cheek — the low, impassioned accents of her voice. Yes, she could love, and she *should* love!

As Raymond decided this point for the woman on the other side of the door to him, he drew himself up. He knew he was not entirely destitute of the qualities which women love in men; why should not Rachel succumb to them, as well as others?

"She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;
She is a woman, therefore may be won."

he repeated to himself, as the quotation flashed through his mind; and he might have added—

"She is *Rachel*, therefore must be loved."

But though he did not say the words, he thought them to his heart's core.

But how should he woo her? Not by continuing his present course of conduct. In the first place he did not think it would succeed; in the second, he did not choose to win her by that means. He believed that Rachel was a woman to be taken by force; he believed that he was a man so to take her. By his present course of action he might win her compassion—her girlish pity for his dumb suffering; but not her admiration—not her longing—nor despair. And he would have them all three; he felt

he *must* have them all three before that bright, impulsive creature would humble herself before him and sue him for his love. His citadel was too shrewd to be taken by stratagem; too proud to yield to entreaty; he would march in and take it by the strength of his manhood alone.

He would no longer let her see that her words or actions pained him; that he shrank from her caresses; that he was afraid to be left alone in her presence. He would treat her ever as he had yet done, with the greatest consideration and kindness; but with it should be mixed indifference—feigned, of course (how much feigned, he knew, as he thought of the difficulty of the task which lay before him)—but still true indifference to her. He would shake off his present feelings of apathy and moodiness. He would shine before her as he knew that he could shine, if he tried; she should see him at his best, and, at the same time, see that he was so not for her sake, but because it was his nature so to be. He would no longer forsake his own amusements or his own companions, though both

should be indulged in moderately; and then, when Rachel saw him with this shade of melancholy, so foreign to his nature, cast aside—saw him in his true character, as Raymond Norreys—perhaps she might love him, until not to show her love became an impossibility to her.

If this did not come to pass, he would apply to be appointed to another ship; he would leave England again; he would kill himself with cholera, or starvation, or drink, or any other legitimate means, and never see her face nor hear her voice in this life more.

And as Raymond came to a determination so sensible and consolatory as the above, he started from his chair, and pacing the room in one or two rapid turns, appeared to be much the easier from contemplating this possible contingency.

In the meanwhile the object of his musing had laid down to rest in the bed where his dead father had been laid out, and notwithstanding the fiercest arguments with herself, had been totally unable, as she did so, to disencumber her mind of the ghastly remembrance.

Rachel's nerves had been overstrung by the events and mental excitement of the day past, and that fact, added to her natural dread of anything connected with death (as associated with others) kept her keenly alive to the import of what her mother-in-law had told her concerning the bed she lay on having had no occupant since it last bore the weight of that rigid, silent body. As she ensconced herself beneath the clothes, she could not help wondering if the corpse had laid upon those very mattrasses, blankets, and coverlet, and as the thought struck her, drew herself away from their contact as if they were Death itself.

Then she fancied, since the lights had been extinguished, that the room had a damp, unearthly feeling about it, that the hangings of the bed smelt mouldy, and that something was moving and rustling behind their ample folds. It was all very well until Raymond had put out his candle; as long as she had that little line of light to watch, streaming beneath the door and through the keyhole, Rachel glanced towards it every time she felt her fears getting

the better of her, and gained fresh courage from the knowledge that some living thing was near at hand.

But when the young man's colloquy ended, and he blew out his candle preparatory to throwing himself for the night upon the sofa in his room, the frightened girl felt as if she could bear it no longer. By that time she had worked her fears up to such a pitch that she fancied shadows were moving between her and the moonlight, and that ghastly, corpse-like faces glared upon her round the corners of the bed. As the light was extinguished in her husband's room, leaving the friendly keyhole wrapt in darkness, Rachel, possessed with a sudden and unconquerable terror, darted from the bed, and crouching against the door which divided the apartments, leant her head against the inanimate wood, as if it were a human creature, to support and comfort her. It was well for Raymond's rest he could not divine that whilst he tried to compose himself to sleep a little pale cheek was pressed against the panels of his door, and scared

eyes were gazing wide into the surrounding gloom, whilst the throbs of the heart of his terrified wife were almost audible in the stillness of the night. Well for his peace that he did not know that there she lay crouched upon the bedroom steps on this, the first night of her return home, shivering with fear, until very shame, at the contemplation of her weakness, drove her back to the couch she dreaded.

Ah! the worst phantom that haunted those silent rooms that night was the shadow of mutual and unnatural reserve which had raised itself between these two young hearts, and forbidden them to read each other's thoughts.

The ghosts which Rachel need have feared to be alone with were not the ghosts of the Past, but of the Present.

The ghosts of her own coldness, indifference, and hardness of heart towards a man who loved her faithfully, and which ghosts, say what she would, dogged her footsteps by day and by night, with Self-reproach and Self-pity (two phantoms very difficult to lay) following closely in their train.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE MARRIED QUARTERS.

When Caroline Wilson left Mrs. Arundel, to return to the Aldershot Camp, she had a long walk before her, although the lodgings of that lady were on the outskirts of the town of Farnborough. But Mrs. Wilson was used to "roughing" it, and thought little of the daily exercise which she took in attending upon her mistress's children. She had accompanied her husband to India and several other foreign stations, and had lived with him in almost every barrack-town in England; and the soldier's wife who has had a little experience of that sort need not be very particular afterwards. And, to say the truth, although this wo-

man carried at times a foul tongue in her head for her neighbours, and was universally disliked wherever she went by the other inmates of the barracks, she was generally submissive enough to her husband, Sergeant Wilson, and made him a good, hard-working, and non-complaining wife. People said that Wilson (a mild enough man in general to women) must possess some mysterious influence by which he swayed and subdued such a known virago as the partner of his bosom; and they were right. Her husband was about the only creature on earth that Caroline really feared; and although she gave him occasionally what she termed "the rough side of her tongue," she invariably got the worst of the argument, and was bound over to keep the peace for some time afterwards. The secret of his power over her was this: Caroline Wilson had been born to better things than travelling on a baggage-waggon, or helping to wash clothes for the men of a regiment; and in her girlish days, when she was the eldest daughter of Mr. Greenaway, of the firm

of Puddle, Greenaway, and Holt, silk-mercers, of St. Paul's Churchyard, and waited behind the counter of her father's shop, in a black silk dress and innumerable ringlets, she would have scorned the idea of ever "taking up" with a private soldier; for be it known that private soldiers, in the class of life from which "young ladies" such as Caroline Greenaway spring, are much looked down upon by the fair sex, and considered very inferior, notwithstanding their inches, bearing, and constant association with their officers, to the so-called gentlemen who skip about mercers' shops, and serve out ribbons to customers, with radish fingers and chestnut nails. But Miss Caroline Greenaway's notions, like those of many of her sex, had to be brought lower before she could settle herself in marriage; still, it was a matter of supreme wonder to all the "young ladies" at Messrs. Puddle, Greenaway, and Holt's establishment, when, after a sojourn on her part in the country, it was formally announced to them, by Miss Caroline herself, that she was about to bestow her hand in matrimony upon

a private soldier; and "Well, I never!" did good duty on those premises for many a succeeding hour. True, that Miss Caroline was no longer a young girl, eight-and-twenty years having passed over her head, and thinned the abundant ringlets which she was wont to shake across the counter at the gentlemen customers. True, also, that she had had a disappointment (some gave it a harsher name) several years before, since which time she had been less assured and lively, sharper, and crosser-grained than she had been thitherto. But still, "a private!" "a common soldier!" the young women exclaimed, forgetting, as they did so, that privates and common soldiers are made of the same stuff, and, in many cases, much better stuff, than either themselves or their progenitors. But then they wear clothing provided by Government, instead of black cloth coats and trousers, bought with their own money, and silk dresses and gold chains, procured — God knows how! And this is, after all, the crying sin for which their own class condemns them as unclean. However, their

animadversions against the servants of the Queen had to be dropped altogether, or only given vent to in furtive whispers, by the hirelings of the establishment in question, after Caroline Greenaway had made up her mind to throw in her lot with one of the military, for she was resolute in her choice, and could hold her own with the best of them when so inclined. But the Greenaways felt the marriage to be a lowering of caste on their part, and, although, for reasons best known to themselves, they consented so to dispose of their eldest daughter, and even hurried the preparations for the marriage, which took place very quietly in the country, they seldom alluded to the circumstance afterwards; and since that time Caroline Wilson had held very little communication with her own family. But if the employés of the linen-draper's establishment had been astonished at a young woman, who had looked for something so much higher, bestowing her hand upon a private soldier, the bridegroom, Thomas Wilson himself, was no less surprised at the condescension of the act.

He had met Miss Greenaway at the house of a mutual friend in the country, and had it not been that she had greatly encouraged him, would never have ventured to make her a downright proposal of marriage. But, with her advances, he began to consider her qualification for the office she aspired to: she was older than himself, certainly, having had five or six years the start of him in life; but men in his station think that circumstance rather an advantage than otherwise; then she was so very "genteel"—so much more so than he had dared to hope for in a wife—it would be so pleasant to present Mrs. Wilson to the other women in his barracks, and feel that she was superior to them all. She was a clever woman, also, and Wilson, being a sensible man, knew the advantages of a good understanding when brought to bear upon every-day matters; and at this period of her life, too, Caroline Greenaway, with her bright black eyes, fresh complexion, and trim figure, was anything but bad-looking. And so, Thomas Wilson being a steady, good soldier, and a credit to his regiment, easily

procured the consent of his commanding-officer to such an undeniably correct match; and the banns were published without loss of time, the ceremony completed, and he took home his bride to Chatham Barracks. But here, after a while, a change came over the comfort his married life promised to afford him. Mrs. Wilson had been introduced to the various members of the 3rd Royal Bays, pronounced "a very respectable looking woman" by the officers, "a devilish fine figure" by the men, and "too much of a lady for *us*," by the women, and had settled down, apparently, with the greatest good-will to the new life surrounding her. But, alas! for the peace of poor Wilson! There is a certain clause in our English Marriage Laws which is a warning to all would-be husbands to look before they leap—a clause by which, should they find, after the fatal deed is over, that their lady-wives have, previous to acquaintanceship with themselves, been frail as well as fair, and, instead of dropping them at the door of the Foundling Hospital, been sufficiently imprudent as to keep any little pledges they

may possess of their former affection under their own control, they (the husbands) are bound down to support such little pledges as if they were their own (which is hard), and bound over to keep the peace as well towards their mothers, which is harder still. But then, the ordinance of matrimony is not one to be rushed into blindfold, and they who do so deserve to be taken in. Thomas Wilson had been so rash. He had known nothing of the former life of Miss Caroline Greenaway when he first saw and wooed her (or suffered her to woo him) in that country visit; and he had married her on her bare word that she was free to become the wife of an honest man. And when he found out, some three months afterwards, that a certain little girl was living in that very country place, who claimed his wife as mother, and had done so for the last five years, his fury knew no bounds. Caroline told him the tale, first with a great show of bravado, knowing his helplessness—afterwards, frightened at his rage, with many tears. The child's father was dead, and had been for some time past,—so far so good;

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but Wilson never quite forgave his wife the scrape into which she had led him. He tried to keep the fact a secret from his fel low comrades; but he always fancied that their wives and themselves knew it as well as he did. He was obliged to support the child, and, as he had none of his own, he felt it no burden except upon his heart. He refused to see her or to have her home, and the little girl had continued to remain where she had been brought up; but he scarcely ever forgot that she existed, or that he had been duped. The love which might have flourished between him and his wife was withered to the very root the day he heard that news, and never showed any signs of life afterwards. But, after all, Caroline was a good wife to him. She did everything that he required from her. She took the money he gave her for the child's support thankfully, and almost humbly. Her submission arose from two reasons. In the first place, she was thoroughly afraid of her husband; for, like all bullies, she was a coward, and his rage, when he discovered her treachery towards him, had been so

great, that she had never forgotten it; and, in the second, she had loved, with all the vehemence of her nature, the father of her child. He had never cared for her (she knew that now); he had thoroughly deceived her; but he had been a gentleman by birth, and he was dead. The first circumstance kept alive her admiration for him—the second her pity; and where a woman both admires and pities, one need not look far for her love. She doted on the child for the sake of the young, gallant, dead father, and her little Martha was the only thing she cared for in the world. She had often wished since her marriage that she might have had another child, and then Wilson would have known what a parent's feelings were; but years passed away, and still Martha's was the only voice to call her "mother." She heard it sometimes. Whilst in England, her husband would occasionally say to her when he got his pay, "Caroline, my girl, here's a pound for you. You can take a couple of days' holiday, and go and spend it." He never asked afterwards where she had been. He knew as well a

if she had told him, that her two days were nvariably spent in the little country place where he had first met her, and in the company of her child. In the meanwhile he was rising steadily from one grade to another, until three good-conduct stripes showed upon his arm, and he was promoted to be sergeant. Rachel mentioned to Cecil Craven, in the first part of this story, that Wilson was a pet of her father's, and Dr. Browne's opinion of the man was a universal one. He was the "pet" of the whole regiment, the "pattern" man, respected and indulged by his officers, and a general favourite amongst the men, who considered him one of the luckiest fellows going, to have a smart wife to accompany him everywhere, and neither chick nor child to bother him. But it was some fifteen years or more since Thomas Wilson had committed the folly of the marriage for which his friends envied him, and most of the men who had been in the 3rd then had died, exchanged, or been invalided, and Sergeant Wilson himself, being a hale and stalwart fellow, was about the only one who had been in

the corps when that event took place. His wife, as I have said before, had accompanied him readily on every foreign service to which the regiment had been appointed, and he had promised her once (whilst she nursed him during an attack of cholera in Gibraltar) that he would let her have Martha home to live with her when they should next return to England. In the meanwhile the child had shot up into a woman, and been for the last three years apprenticed to the dressmaking trade in London, being, at the time that the 3rd Royal Bays reached Aldershot, about twenty years of age. She had never since her birth received any notice from the Greenaways; and this fact aggravated her mother to such an extent that she had stopped even the slight communication she had hitherto maintained with her family. Martha had been sent for from London on the arrival of the regiment in England, and installed in the Aldershot Barracks; and her putative father, finding that she was a very handsome, blooming young woman, had sunk some of his prejudices against her, although his re-

ception could scarcely have been termed cordial, and was very willing that she should take her mother's place in keeping his barrack-room comfortable, whilst the latter was away on service in Mrs. Arundel's family. This has been a long explanation, but it is necessary to the better understanding of the circumstances which led to the coming events of my story. As Caroline Wilson walked homewards from Farnborough on the evening in question, her heart beat quite fast at the anticipation of the meeting with her daughter. She had seen little of her during her lifetime, and then been afraid openly to show her affection; but now, for the first time, Martha seemed her own. The 3rd had not yet thoroughly settled down, and some of the regiment were placed anywhere until the head-quarters arrived. The Wilsons had one room allotted them, a large whitewashed room, in that part of the permanent barracks which was kept for the married men. It was nearly nine o'clock when Caroline Wilson arrived there. She went up the general staircase, and through the long passage,

expecting on her arrival to find Martha putting the place tidy, and the sergeant himself enjoying his pipe after his evening meal. It had usually been so on her nightly return home during the short time they had been in England; but it was not so to-night. The room looked thoroughly untidy; the hearth was unswept, even the beds unmade, and the partition which screened off that of the girl's, and which was usually put up by that time in the evening, was still resting in its place against the wall. The sergeant himself, in his shirt and trousers, was sitting by the fire-place, smoking, with his elbows on his knees, looking thoroughly out of humour,—although the whole barrack was resounding with various tunes played upon various instruments, and noisy choruses, accompanied by much clapping of hands and laughter.

"Why, what's the matter, Wilson?" exclaimed his wife, as she caught sight of his forlorn figure. "Haven't you had your tea?"

"How am I to get my tea, I should like to know," he replied, roughly, "when there

ain't a woman about the place as belongs to me?"

"Why, where's Martha?" inquired Mrs. Wilson, as she disencumbered herself of her bonnet and shawl, and hung them up against the wall.

"The devil knows," replied her husband. "I've never set eyes on her since eleven o'clock this morning."

"Mercy on us!" ejaculated Mrs. Wilson; "haven't you asked any one about the barracks for tidings of her?"

"Not I," he rejoined, sulkily; "she's none of mine."

This last observation nettled Mrs. Wilson.

"Well, you needn't let the whole barrack know it," she replied, angrily, as she left the room to make inquiries of the other women about her girl.

But Martha was with none of them, nor had she been, and not a few 'heads were tossed as her mother asked the neighbours of her whereabouts; for "Miss Wilson" was a great deal too pretty for her propinquity to please the matrons of the 3rd Royal Bays, whose husbands had already expressed their

admiration of the new-comer's charms more freely than they liked. Only little Mrs. Tomkins, whose marriage had taken place two days before, and who as yet feared no rival, was found willing to afford the necessary information. She had seen Martha Wilson, she said, as she stood blushing at her open door, at about ten o'clock that morning, when the orderly brought round the letters; for the girl had received one, and when she read it, had asked Mrs. Tomkins to tell her father, when he came in from drill, that she was going out, and should not be back until the evening. "But I didn't see her go," was the finale of Mrs. Tomkins's speech, "and I suppose that drove it clean out of my head; for I never thought to mention it to the sergeant till now. I hope it ain't of any consequence;" and, with this apology for her forgetfulness, withdrew again to the company of the enamoured Tomkins.

Mrs. Wilson returned to her own room, rather vexed at the thoughtlessness of her daughter, and rather fearful of the remarks of her husband, but still quite prepared to

take the part of the former against the latter.

"Girls will be girls," she remarked, with assumed carelessness, as she re-entered the presence of her lord. "Mrs. Tomkins says she thinks Martha went out for a walk this morning; but what's kept her till now I can't think. I only hope it isn't an accident."

"Accident!" growled the sergeant; "I wonder what accident is likely to befall a hearty lass like that? but I ain't going to keep her here for nothing, and so I shall tell her when next we meet. I've bin alone all day;" and he attacked his pipe again with savage energy. Mrs. Wilson wisely made him, for the present, no answer, but directed her attention to setting out the tea-table, making the kettle boil, and putting the room in order for the night. She was quite ready to defend her daughter, but she was mortally afraid of making the sergeant's anger against her worse if she tried to find excuses for her absence. The stone staircase which led to the soldiers' dormitories was so frequently traversed,

that one footstep upon it was not discernible from another; and, consequently, in about a quarter of an hour more, the object of their discussion, Martha herself, stood in the doorway, regarding them before they had become aware of her approach. She was, without doubt, a very handsome girl—straight as a young poplar, with a well-defined figure—a brilliant complexion, and dark eyes and hair; the only feature which deteriorated from the beauty of her face being her mouth, which was large and coarse, with full, red lips. But, with all her good looks, there was still overshadowing the countenance of Martha Wilson (as she was called) the same expression of vindictiveness which characterised that of her mother, with this point of redemption only, that she did not appear sly. Bad-tempered and passionate she certainly was; vindictive and revengeful she might be; but there were no signs of craftiness in that voluptuous mouth, nor in the full, wide-open eyes which surmounted it. The girl was dressed fashionably for her station in life, and rather showily—as

milliners' apprentices love to appear—apeing the costumes, by the making of which they gain their bread. Her little black-net bonnet was set far off her head, whilst a cheap scarlet rose showed on one side of her blooming cheeks; her shawl was half falling off her shoulders and light-flowered muslin dress, exposing well to view the proportions of her ample bust, and not too delicately-shaped waist. She did not appear in the least abashed as she stood in the open doorway and surveyed the sergeant and his wife; on the contrary, she seemed in a very good-humoured mood, for she smiled readily as she caught her mother's eye, displaying all her large white teeth in the action.

"Well, mother!" she exclaimed; "how are you?"

"Lor, Martha!" said Caroline Wilson, starting as the girl addressed her; "how late you are, my dear! Where have you been to?"

But before Martha could answer the question, the sergeant caught up her theme.

"*How are you?*" he said, mimicking her

salutation; "is that all you've got to say to your mother when you've absented yourself from duty for a whole day without leave. Ain't you ashamed of yourself to see her a setting out that tea-table, and to know that it hasn't been set out till this hour, when you ought to have been here to do it at five o'clock? If you ain't ashamed you ought to be."

For though Wilson was used to dine at the sergeants' mess with the rest of the non-commissioned officers, he was always sorely put out if his old woman had not a cup of tea ready for him afterwards, at the hour that he loved to take it.

All the good-humour vanished from Martha's face as the above remarks reached her ear; her lips pouted, and her eyes (so like her mother's when she was angry) grew dark and sullen.

"No, I ain't," she said, decisively, as she threw her bonnet and shawl upon the bed; "it's mother's business to do it, not mine. I didn't know I had been brought here to be a slave to anybody."

"And I'm sure nobody wants you to be

so, Martha," interposed her mother, with a view to domestic peace. "Come, sit down, and have your tea."

"That she shan't!" ejaculated the sergeant, rising in his anger, pipe in hand, and advancing towards the tea-table; "that gal don't sit down and take crust of mine till she has asked your pardon for giving you the trouble of laying it, and mine, for stopping out all this time without leave. I'll have no gals running off from this room and amusing themselves—God knows how—for the whole of a summer's day. Now, Miss Martha, you know what you've got to do, and the best thing you can do, is to do it."

Fire was flashing from beneath the girl's lowered brows; and her return look at the sergeant was one of unmitigated defiance.

"And that I won't," she replied, with a toss of her angry head. "I've never asked pardon of any one yet, as I can remember, and I ain't going to begin with you, I can tell you." And she looked as if she meant what she said.

"Caroline," said the sergeant, almost

trembling with his rage, "there's your daughter, and if you don't wish to see me put her out of this room to-night with these two hands, you'd better bring her to reason. I've borne a good deal from you at times, but——" (and here a good round oath slipped out of the enraged man's mouth) "if I'm going to bear it again from any one, let alone such as her."

Caroline Wilson saw that something serious would happen if she did not interfere, and, therefore, she attempted to coax her daughter into a semblance of submission, by saying—

"Come, Martha, my girl, just tell your father as you're sorry, and won't do it again, and that will set us all right in a couple of words."

But here Sergeant Wilson again interposed.

"Her father! I'm no father of hers! Don't go sticking any lies of that sort down that gal's throat, Caroline, or as sure as there's a heaven above us, I'll let the whole barrack know what she and her mother is."

But Mrs. Wilson was to be cowed no longer.

"I know you ain't," she retorted; "her father was a better man than you any day. He was none of your low sort who find fault for nothing at all, and then threaten to turn helpless women from their doors when they don't mean it."

"Don't I mean it, by ——!" returned the sergeant. "Caroline, will that gal of yours say where she's bin the whole of this day, and ask pardon for the trouble she's given, or not?"

The "gal," whom it did not appear worth while to take into this discussion, had, until now, stood a little apart, returning the glances, which were alternately directed to her by the sergeant and his wife, with a haughty, impudent look, as if she would show how little she cared about their quarrel, or themselves. But this time she chose to give her own answer.

"No, I won't," she said, defiantly; "I won't say where I've been, or why; nor I won't ask your pardon, neither. I'm not a slave, nor a blackamoor, and there's

plenty as I could go to this night as would be glad to see me, and keep me better than you will ever do."

"Then go to them," shouted the sergeant; "for you shan't stop here and give a loose to your tongue whenever you please; I've had enough of that from your mother."

But at this point Mrs. Wilson was thoroughly alarmed.

"You wouldn't leave your mother, Martha, would you?" she said; "when it isn't more than ten days since we've met each other; and I have longed for this time for years." Something in her mother's voice touched the girl's nature, and she replied, more quietly, though not less sullenly—

"Well, it isn't my fault, mother, any way; it's the fault of that man there. I've got friends in London—where you left me to be brought up—as I care for; and if I can't go and see 'em when and how I choose—without questions being asked, and pardons being given every time—why I'd rather go back to my dressmaking at once, for this isn't the sort of life to suit me."

"If you think," said Sergeant Wilson, deigning again to address Martha herself, "that I'll have a gal under my care—be she mine or not—running up and down to London—or any other place—just when she chooses, and carrying on any sort of game she likes, you're very much mistaken. If you lives in these barracks along with your mother and self (which I'm sorry I ever gave her leave to bring you home) you shan't go to disgrace the regiment to which we belong. If you've got respectable friends in London, well and good; when it's convenient, your mother or I will take you up there for to see 'em; but you don't go alone again, so don't think it; and you don't leave this room either without giving us notice that you are going out, and why: for you come of a bad stock," he added, as a final pleasantry, "and I doubt you're no more to be trusted than your mother was before you."

It was the second time the subject had been mentioned that evening; and the girl, although low bred and born, had some feelings in her akin to those of others.

She turned rather pale now as she twisted round her figure so as to confront her mother's gaze.

"Mother," she said, "is that truth or not? Ain't this man my father?"

The wretched woman had hoped to keep her shameful secret from her daughter, but she saw no help now but to confess the truth to her.

"No, he's not, Martha," she replied, with a show of bravado. "Its just as well you should know it as not. This man's my husband, bad luck to him; but we haven't been married more than fifteen years. Your father was a gentleman, my girl, born and bred. You might have known you didn't come from such blood as common soldiers are made of."

"So he ain't my father," repeated Martha, as if the surprise of the discovery had for the moment quite subdued her. "I'm glad you've told me, mother, for I couldn't have felt to him as one, any way."

"Couldn't have felt to me as one? you young hussy," returned the sergeant. "I wouldn't own such as you for my daughter.

Get out of my room, will you, and your mother may go after you, if she chooses. I'll stand this sort of thing no longer, and that I tell you."

"Wilson, you're not in earnest?" screamed the mother. "I've been very hasty, Wilson, I know I have, and said a lot of things that I shouldn't have said, but you drove me to it. You wouldn't really turn a girl like this out of your room, and at night, too? Its dark, Wilson; think of that." In her agony for her daughter, and the fear of losing her, Caroline Wilson forgot her own rage, and would have humbled herself in the dust before her husband. But the girl herself prevented it.

"'Tain't of no use, mother," she said, "for I wouldn't stay here for a thousand pounds. I ain't none of his, and now I knows it I won't be beholden to him for a crust of bread. I can get my own living, never fear;" and she commenced to reassume her bonnet and shawl as she spoke.

"Martha, my dear, listen to me," urged her mother. "Wilson, you'll never let her go, a young thing like that, and not a roof

to turn to. Wilson, you're a man; keep her by us till to-morrow morning."

"Caroline," said the sergeant, solemnly; "if your daughter will do now what I've asked of her before—beg my pardon for her fault, and say she won't repeat it, I'll be ready to look it over, and keep her here, not only till to-morrow morning, but as long as she chooses to stay along of us. But I've passed my word, and it can't be arranged otherwise."

"Martha, my dear," said the mother, turning to the girl herself, "do as he asks you; it is only a word, my dear, and everything will be right and comfortable between us again."

"I don't want nothing to be right nor comfortable," responded the girl, still making arrangements for her departure. "As I've said before, I ain't a black, and I shan't ask that man's pardon, nor any one's."

"Then go to the devil with you!" exclaimed the sergeant, fairly roused and indignant at the girl's insolence.

"Not I," she shouted, throwing back a parting word at him, "for fear of meeting

you there." She flounced down the barrack stairs as she spoke, but before she had reached the bottom step, her mother, with her walking-things hastily thrown about her, was by her side.

"Martha, dear, where are you going to?" she said, as she joined her daughter.

"Heaven knows and cares," she said, "for I don't."

A shudder ran through Caroline Wilson's frame as she heard the reckless words, and remembered what recklessness had ended in for her own blighted youth. As they passed out of the barrack gate, the bugle sounded "All lights out." The large camp was suddenly wrapt in darkness, and ten strokes pealed out from some clock near at hand.

"I shan't get back into camp to-night," said Caroline Wilson, as she heard the sound, "and so I shall go into Farnborough with you, my girl, and get Mrs. Bennett" (Mrs. Bennett being the landlady of Mrs. Arundel's lodgings) "to put us up till the morning."

When the two women had, after dint of

a good deal of perseverance, roused the sleepy servant-girl at the lodgings aforesaid, and upon relating a piteous tale of their being shut out of barracks by mistake, gained her mistress's consent to their passing the remainder of the night upon her kitchen floor, the mother had time to give over the vituperative abuse of her husband, which she had kept up all the way from Aldershot to Farnborough, and consider seriously with her daughter what was to be done for her in the future. Martha had said she would return to the dressmaking trade, but there were difficulties in the way of that plan, for the time of her apprenticeship was up, and as an assistant she would have to board out of the establishment, which project required more ready money than her mother could at present command, for, of course, assistance from the sergeant was not now to be depended on.

"Would you mind service, Martha?" inquired her mother, presently; and Martha said—no she shouldn't, not if it was a good place, and she could get a holiday now and then.

"Mrs. Arundel wants me to go and live with her at Weybridge," said Mrs. Wilson, and I refused on your account; but if you fancy it, Martha, and I could get you into a house like the Court, now, which is close to Laburnum Cottage, or whatever they call the place, I could see after you a bit, and know that you weren't put upon in any way, and were happy, and so on; for I haven't got anything but you, my dear, to care for, and to think about."

Her daughter was quite agreeable to the plan. She wouldn't mind trying service, or anything, so long as she wasn't asked to go back to the barracks, for she wouldn't do that, "not for ever so;" she'd starve first.

And so it was arranged between them, before the morning, that Mrs. Wilson should accept Mrs. Arundel's offers of further service, by which means she would continue to have a little money of her own, and be able to see her daughter, and benefit her. And to this plan Caroline knew the sergeant would not be likely to raise any objection, for he was only too glad when he could get her tongue out of his quarters and his pay

to himself. The only stipulation he ever made when she expressed a desire to leave him for service, was that she should support herself. "For as I have to pay a woman to do your work," he used to say, "you must see, Caroline, that that is only fair."

But during the vigil held by the two women in that dark little kitchen, Caroline ventured once to put a question to her daughter relative to the subject of the evening's quarrel.

"You'll tell *me*, Martha deary," she said, "me, who am your own mother, what took you to London to-day, and kept you there, won't you? Was it anything to do with the letter that Mrs. Tomkins said she saw you receive this morning?"

But Martha wasn't to be cajoled out of her secret, even by her own mother.

"That's *my* business," she said, in reply; "and mother, if you don't want to quarrel with me, as that man in the barracks did, I think you'll hold your tongue on the subject, and not bother me with any more questions. For I ain't a sieve; and when I choose to keep a thing to myself, I keeps it."

CHAPTER IV.

DISCLOSES SOME OF THEIR PLANS.

It was perfectly true that Mrs. Arundel had made an offer to retain Caroline Wilson in her service after she had settled at Weybridge, and that the woman's refusal of the same had greatly annoyed her, although it is difficult to imagine to what account, at this time, the mistress thought of turning the servant's talent for deception. Perhaps her wish to keep her in her pay arose simply from a fear that she might repeat more in the regiment than it was at present convenient for Mrs. Arundel to have known; and, therefore, until the design she had it in her heart to execute was accomplished, it was as well to have one who knew and had heard so much under her

own surveillance. For that Eliza Arundel had made up her mind to marry Cecil Craven needs scarcely here to be publicly registered. What mattered it that it was scarcely a month since her poor blundering, forbearing husband had been swept off the deck of the homeward-bound transport, and hurried into eternity without a farewell word to her or any one? As she had had it in her possible nature to dream of this contingency long before there was any chance of its happening, so she found no difficulty in rejoicing in its occurrence even in the first blush of her freedom. She was too cunning to let the world guess this, as she had been too cunning in the days of her married life to let it solve the riddle of the change in her manner towards Cecil Craven, and her jealousy of Rachel Norreys. She had hated to see these two together in their walks and rides, to mark their pleasure at meeting, their whispered confidences, and mutual understanding; and yet she had furthered it all, and appeared to take a delight in furthering it, as if she rejoiced in nursing her jealousy, and

in having as substantial a cause as possible against Cecil Craven for her reproachful glances and sighs. For the days had been when that gentleman had affected the company of his major's wife far more than he did at present; days that he now looked back upon with unmitigated surprise at the bad taste of his youth, but which the object of his then passion had never forgotten. Cecil had passed through the ordeal like many another junior of the 3rd Royal Bays before him, fiercely for the time, but soon cured, and ready to question, before three months were over, what on earth could have so infatuated him as to make him fancy he was in love with Eliza Arundel. But though the lady herself was used to that sort of thing, and had stood fire against a score of love-sick boys before, who had only amused her by their openly-expressed admiration of her white shoulders, flaxen hair, and china blue eyes—no less than by the rapid fading away of their arduous attentions, somehow, the same compliments from Cecil Craven's mouth had not sounded quite so hackneyed

in her ears, and she missed them sadly when they ceased to be. There was something in the suave, gentlemanly manners of the boy of eighteen—something perhaps, too, in the handsome fair face, and graceful figure of the stripling, which went home wonderfully to the heart of this woman of the world—for that, although only four years his senior, Eliza Arundel, when he first met her, already was. He would have broken through her meshes as other birds had done before him, as soon as he had tired of his fancy (for no one, however young, could associate with her and not discover how artificial she could be), but once trapped, the major's wife would not let him go. He tried hard to escape, but she held on to him with too powerful a hand; and what man under two-and-twenty can resist being made love to by a tolerable looking woman, even though she be one of whom he is already a little tired? "She's all very well," used Cecil Craven to say to himself, "when there's nobody better to make love to," and with this sort of compulsory homage was Eliza Arundel obliged to

satisfy her penchant for the young Adonis who lorded it over her. For several years he was known to be fetcher and carrier to Mrs. Arundel; and during these years it was that the scandal concerning them, which has already been alluded to in this story, rose up, was commented upon, and extinguished.

But a day came when Rachel Norreys left her finishing school for the last time, and accompanied her father to Gibraltar with the 3rd Royal Bays. The intimacy which had subsisted between these two as children drew them closer together than the usages of society would have done, particularly as Rachel was a married woman; and Dr. Browne had always appeared desirous of cementing their friendship as much as lay in his power, for we know now that he had loved the mother of the young man, and cherished her remembrance. Then it was that the demon of jealousy took possession of Mrs. Arundel, even at the very time that she was fawning upon and caressing Rachel Norreys, and worming all her secrets from out the bosom

of the young unsuspecting girl. Rachel commenced by thinking Mrs. Arundel very kind and friendly, went on by wondering what she could find so attractive in herself, and ended by imagining that she cared for the friend who always swore she loved her, and had got possession of some of her most private opinions. But the last few months had opened Rachel's eyes in a slight degree to the character of her confidante. She would rather have kept them closed; she bore the light badly, blinking at it, and laying the fault of the sun upon her own powers of vision; but to one or two particulars she could be no longer blind. She knew that Eliza Arundel was not perfectly sincere; she almost believed that she had not been so in everything, even to herself.

Cecil Craven guessed the state of feeling which his ci-devant flame was entertaining for him, but he did not care about it. *His* eyes were fully open now, and had been for some time past, and his only desire was to keep Rachel Norreys from too great an intimacy with Mrs. Arundel; but in

that he had been unsuccessful, because he found, for his warnings to have any effect with the former, that he must be more explicit than behoved him, as a gentleman, to speak of one lady to another. He had been subjected to a great deal of reproach on Mrs. Arundel's part when he first forswore his allegiance to her; he had been forced to be the witness of a great many tears; to feel himself the cause of whole days of seclusion, from which she would issue with heavy eyes and pallid features; but though these circumstances annoyed and irritated him, her fascination over him had lost its power to make him feel more, and gradually his tormentor had dropped her futile attempts to win him back, although she only bided her opportunity. But at this time when she resolved, against the wishes of both her own family and that of her late husband, to take Laburnum Cottage, and settle near the Court, it must not be imagined that love for Cecil Craven influenced her decision. Even the brief passion she had entertained for him in former days, and to which she had given

that sacred name, was no more love than she was Venus; and that had long since died away, and in its place, and for the sake of what her vanity had suffered in losing his admiration, she longed for her revenge. She would like to settle near his home; to see him when there were no calls of duty to distract his attention from her; to revive the old days, the old recollections; in one word, to supersede Rachel Norreys in his affections; to cast her chains about him again, and to induce him to make her his wife. She knew the temperament of the man she was about to work on; she had read his soft, yielding disposition only too well, and she believed, that, with fair play, the game would be in her own hands.

But ductile as he was, she had not quite fathomed the depth of Cecil's long-rooted aversion to herself. When he heard, a few days after his interview with Rachel Norreys in the lodgings at Farnborough, that Laburnum Cottage had been certainly taken on a long lease by Mrs. Arundel, his disgust knew no bounds; but he did not like

to say too much to his mother against her coming neighbour. In the first place, the same obstacle which had opposed itself to his attempts at dissuading Rachel from being too intimate with the lady in question, the impossibility of giving a good reason for his own dislike of her, rose up whenever he tried to speak on the subject with Mrs. Craven. And, after all, she was a woman, and a woman he had once professed to like, and Weybridge was open to her as to the world; and he trusted a great deal to his mother's powers of discernment, which he hoped would very soon make her aware how far the new comer was to be relied upon as a friend. But in this he was too confident; for, although Mrs. Craven was a far cleverer woman than Mrs. Arundel, her cleverness stood no chance against the other's craftiness. Mrs. Craven was quick at understanding a subject or in managing an affair, but she was foolishly hasty on occasions, often led away by her fancy, and very open to flattery, as who is not? Mrs. Arundel, on the contrary, was not quick, but she was cunning, which

often answers better in this world when the purpose is bad. The one woman possessed a rash impetuosity which might hurry her into any crime, and dexterity enough to accomplish it; but there her cleverness ended. She had no power to go happily through life afterwards, and to sit down smiling under concealment; no art or sophistry wherewith to reason herself out of the remembrance of a committed wrong; whilst the other, without the same excitement to urge her forward, sinned her sins, and only regretted them if they failed of success, and was perfectly contented so long as her own subtlety could hide them from the world. No ghost of an unredeemed past ever came by night to startle Eliza Arundel from uneasy sleep, to remind her of the lying looks and words which were the daily coinage she passed amongst her friends. She had used them so long; she had so familiarized herself with deception, that it was doubtful if she could really distinguish between what was truth and what falsehood. Therefore it was that Cecil Craven showed his usual mediocrity

of judgment when he compared his mother's intellect with Mrs. Arundel's guile, and thought it was a fair case of "diamond cut diamond." He did go so far as to say, when the news reached Craven Court that the widow had really taken the cottage—

"I'm sorry to hear it. Don't let her get too intimate here, mother; we don't want a lot of women popping in at any hour of the day." But his mother had laughed, and said she supposed he was afraid of his *tête-à-têtes* with Lady Frances Morgan being interrupted (which *tête-à-têtes*, indeed, were becoming very frequent, and decidedly warmer upon each repetition); but that he must remember that his old mother wanted a companion now and then as well as himself. "And, indeed," Mrs. Craven concluded by saying, "it will be quite a blessing for me if Mrs. Arundel proves a nice acquaintance, for a quiet lady friend to run in and talk to me sometimes is just what I want. Besides, poor thing! she must be badly off to have decided upon taking the cottage, which is an extra reason that we should be kind to her, Cecil, since

you seem to have received a great deal of hospitality at her hands."

Cecil bit his lip, and was silent. He could just imagine how "quiet" Mrs. Arundel would pretend to be as long as it gained her the entrée of the Court; how sympathetic, how exemplary, how woe-begone! and how very kindly she would take to "running in" at every hour of the day, and appearing at every meal that graced their table. And yet, how could he object to his mother choosing her own friends, or showing attention to the widow of the major of his regiment? Poor Cecil was in a quandary, and he was not clever enough to pick his way out again, and so he directed his attention to Lady Frances as a pleasanter subject, and tried to forget that the other existed.

The "quiet, unhappy, and badly off" appearance was exactly the line of action that Mrs. Arundel had elected to take up, as being the one most calculated to prove interesting to the mistress of Craven Court, to whom the character could prove no rival; and with that idea in view, she had,

like a good general, reviewed her forces, examined her ammunition, and settled on her point of attack. With regard to the last requisition, nothing could have suited her better in every respect than the little house which went by the name of Laburnum Cottage. It was a tiny place, of not more than four rooms besides the kitchen offices, and had originally been built for a lodge to Craven Court; but when a portion of that property was parted with to form a public road, had been sold, and a fresh lodge erected close to the new boundaries of the estate. The purchaser of Laburnum Cottage, when he had concluded his bargain, had scarcely known what to do with it: it was too small for the permanent occupancy of gentlepeople, and too far from the town for the convenience of the poor; and so he had surrounded it with a tasteful little garden, furnished it in a cheap style, and let it for the summer months to people desirous of a few weeks' change into the country. Thus, year after year, an advertisement very similar to the following had appeared in the columns of the daily papers:—

"WEYBRIDGE.—To be let, furnished, near this charming locality, for a long or short period, a cottage ornée, containing every convenience for a family, with large shrubbery and pleasure-garden, extensive lawn, and trout-stream running through the premises. Rent, if taken by the week, three guineas.—Address, 'A. B.,' Laburnum Cottage, Weybridge."

Heads of families who had made up their minds to pass the hot weather out of town, and give all the little Browns, Joneses, or Tomkinsons the benefit of country air whilst they could enjoy it, were wont to snatch at this advertisement, and say to materfamilias, "Weybridge! Let's see, my dear. Ah! close to Walton-on-Thames. The very thing for us! And fancy how pleasant having the large shrubbery and garden for the dear children, and a trout-stream actually in the grounds—the very thing for Tom and Dick!—convenience itself! I'll write at once, and ascertain the veracity of the advertisement." And, after writing, the head of the family had been used to run down to Weybridge by train

to see the place he had already determined in his heart to call for the summer his own, and was generally disappointed at finding that the cottage ornée contained only four rooms—that the shrubbery, extensive lawn, and pleasure-garden consisted of a circular plot of grass surrounded by a small carriage-drive and belted by a few clumps of laurustinus and arbor vitæ—and that the trout-stream was a ditch running through the tiny back garden, which, whatever it might be in the days of winter, was, at the time when fishing is a desirable occupation, invariably dried up, or stagnant. If there is one thing above another that John Bull hates, it is being taken in; and the general consequence of viewing Laburnum Cottage was that honest men were made to swear a great deal more than was needful; but some there were, with small families, who, sickened of many similar newspaper lies, and, after much searching, having nowhere to lay their heads, would, almost against their own conscience, come to an understanding with the landlord of Laburnum Cottage, and, after beating him

down to half the rent he asked for it, establish themselves as summer inmates of the little place. By this means Craven Court had had strange neighbours, and most of the lodgers at the cottage were of such questionable birth, that Mrs. Craven was glad to think that a gentlewoman was to be its permanent inmate. Mrs. Arundel had shown great adroitness by the manner in which she had wheedled the owner of the cottage to let her have it upon lease on her own terms; and although he was rather tired of the constant trouble which his former plan of letting and re-letting had imposed upon him, a woman with less blandishment in her voice and smoothness on her tongue would scarcely have persuaded him to accept her terms so readily. But he was persuaded somehow, and had agreed to let her hold the cottage, furnished as it was, upon a very low rent for a lease of seven years. And thus provided with precisely the house she had wished for, her two boys, placed at school by her husband's family, and only little Emily left upon her hands, the sole thing wanting to Mrs.

Arundel had been the securing of Caroline Wilson as her aide-de-camp; and when that worthy, after the conversation held with her daughter in Mrs. Bennett's kitchen, expressed herself ready and willing to accompany her mistress on her new life, Elise Arundel felt, as she transferred herself and baggage to Laburnum Cottage, as if she had all that for the present she could wish for.

Caroline Wilson had a double reason, when the time for starting came, for being agreeable to accompany her mistress to Weybridge, for her daughter was actually settled there before her. Not many days after Martha's expulsion from the barracks her mother had read an advertisement in the county paper for an under-housemaid, with application to be made to the housekeeper at Craven Court—the fact being that Mrs. Craven left everything connected with household affairs to the management of the housekeeper, who had been with her many years; and the old dame, not being blessed with the sweetest of tempers, changed her underlings pretty

often in the course of a twelvemonth; and an advertisement for some one or other wanted at Craven Court was almost as familiar to the eyes of the subscribers to the 'County Chronicle' as the title itself.

It was the very thing, however, that Caroline had desired for her daughter, and she was as pleased at lighting upon it as her mistress had been at finding Laburnum Cottage. She waited upon Major Craven at once with the paper in her hand, and a supplication that he would write a few lines of recommendation of her daughter to his mother's housekeeper, as she was very anxious to procure the situation for her. Cecil saw no harm in the proceeding; he knew that Rachel disliked Mrs. Wilson, but daughters did not always take after their mothers, and it was nothing to him who was under-housemaid at Craven Court, and so he scratched off a note to Mrs. Watson to intimate that the bearer was the daughter of one of the sergeants of his regiment, etc., which note had a magic effect upon the old housekeeper, and Martha was installed at the Court almost as soon as she appeared

there. And whilst her elders and betters were plotting and scheming to attain the fruition of their wishes, this girl, young and uneducated though she was, had also her cherished secret, her planned-out hope for the future, to attain which she had acted so as to bring in view the end which she desired. For though her sojourn at the barracks had been broken short rather sooner than she expected, she had never contemplated staying there long from the first day that she had entered them. She had been left very much to herself during her girlhood, as all dressmakers' apprentices in London are. She had been fed and housed and worked hard through the entire weeks, and on Sundays she had been turned adrift, told to go where she chose and do what she chose, but to shelter and keep herself until nightfall. Sunday was the only holiday that the mistress of the establishment herself enjoyed—that was the only day she had to drive down with her husband or friends to Richmond, or Greenwich, or to make one of a boating-party or a pic-nic. And therefore on Sundays, the sixty or seventy pairs

of hands—(ah, would they had been only hands!)—the sixty or seventy *hearts* in her employment were turned abroad to do what they liked, so as they did not prove any further trouble to herself. And what should girls do in London; young, untaught, inexperienced creatures, with their week's salary in their hands, and the world before them, where to choose? They did far better than we should imagine, and no worse than those had a right to expect who threw them thus into the way of temptation. Some, a very few, went to morning church; others strolled in groups about the parks and public gardens, ready to giggle and talk with any stranger who chose to address them. Such as were happy enough to have friends in town, who asked them home for those errant Sundays, gladly took advantage of the invitation; and those who had what they termed "a young man," would go in his company wheresoever he chose to take them. Amongst the last was Martha Wilson. She was a fine, showy girl, with a tolerable amount of conversation in her, and had unfortunately attracted the attention of

one of those anomalous creatures who, writing themselves down "gentleman," still take a greater pleasure in associating with people beneath them in rank than with their equals. The man, however, who had condescended occasionally to take notice of Martha Wilson (for in truth his attentions were nothing more), was really one of the upper classes, although, from his companions and appearance, it would have been difficult to tell at a glance to what grade he belonged. He had met the girl accidentally, and almost accidentally continued his acquaintance with her. He found her smart, voluble, and not more forward than he admired; and he very soon discovered that where he had simply intended having a "lark," he had contrived to make a very deep impression. Martha was of a very susceptible nature, and the mystery connected with her friend (for she knew that the name he gave her of Tom White was an assumed one), combined with her knowledge that he was a gentleman, all served to heighten the interest she felt in him. For had he not taken her down the rivér in a boat, in company with other gen-

tlemen, one of whom called him by some long name that she could scarcely remember, and to which he had replied, "Hush! hold your tongue, Cavendish!" And had she not been once—poor Martha! with nothing but her own wishes to guide her—to see him at his chambers in the Albany, where everything was fit for a prince, and when she asked for Mr. White, had not the hall-porter who opened the door said there was no one there of that name, until he came himself in a beautiful flowered silk dressing-gown, and called over the banisters that it was "all right," and then she had been allowed to go up and see him? And had he not (the girl's cheeks would burn afresh at the remembrance) called her his "own Martha," and said he would make a lady of her, or she deserved to be a lady, or words to that effect? And had he not—oh, heavens!—kissed her, not once, but dozens of times? As she thought of it she could feel the touch of his silky moustache even now, and seem to smell the scented fixature he used to control its wayward qualities. Poor Martha! untutored in every particular

except in the one great universal lesson which comes instinctively to us all, she thoroughly loved and worshipped this mysterious hero of her imagination, this prince of gentlemen, this nobleman in disguise. She felt for him as a dog feels for his master, that to lie at his feet alone would be happiness too great for her. She seldom indulged in any dreams of his marrying her, or indeed of his marrying at all. He seemed too high and lofty for anything so common. She would have been blissfully content could she have known for certain that until her dying day, or his, she might have the privilege of waiting upon him incessantly, of ministering to all his necessities, of blacking his boots and making his bed, and receiving in return one of those smiles he was wont to bestow upon her when she said anything that pleased him. In reality, the gentleman in question was a very dissipated individual, not only in appearance but by disposition, as was shown by his carelessly drawing a young, unprotected girl into an acquaintanceship which could lead to no good for either of them. But Martha knew nothing

of this—saw nothing of it. To be within hail of this divinity of her imagination—to see him sometimes, to hear his voice, and know that he was well and happy, was all that her infatuation demanded. She loved him blindly, like a dumb animal that knows not the name of esteem, but she loved him well. And to gain her liberty sometimes for this purpose, Martha was willing to go into service, else it was not the kind of life that best suited the inclinations of a girl who had been left so much to herself. It was a note from him which had taken her to London on the morning she quarrelled with her mother's husband, simply a wish expressed to see her from the worldly man who had no better amusement for the day in view; but it had had the effect of taking her into his presence as quickly as train would do it, and was the consequence, as has been seen, of her being turned out of her mother's home. Well, she was in service now, as under-housemaid at the Court, and although she did not much like Mrs. Watson's tone of authority, nor the strictness of her rules, she must make the best of

it for the sake of those "Sundays out" which came round once in three weeks, when she would have the happiness and glorification of breathing the same air as her idol, if she never had a penny left to spend upon herself for the whole of the rest of the year.

And in the meanwhile her mother arrived at Laburnum Cottage, in the service of Mrs. Arundel, and constituted, with the exception of a woman who came in daily to do the cooking and dirty work, the whole of the ménage of that bower of artlessness and truth.

Eliza Arundel was very much indeed the forlorn and broken-spirited widow for the first few weeks that she was the mistress of the cottage. Bereft of her husband by such a cruel and sudden shock; bereft of her children, her *dear* boys, from the fact of her means not permitting her to keep them by her, reduced to *this* (the preposition intimating Laburnum Cottage and its surroundings), with only her sweet little daughter to bear her company, the widow did indeed appear a creature to be made

much of, and pitied, and consoled, in the stranger eyes of Mrs. Craven. Indeed, she was so greatly taken upon first sight with her new acquaintance, that she openly condemned the unfeeling manner in which Cecil had spoken of his poor friend; and thought that it was impossible she could do too much to show her sympathy in such an affliction, and her gratitude for the past kindness her son had received at Mrs. Arundel's hands.

The gardener at Craven Court was directed, much against his will, to send a man to stock and put in order the little garden of Laburnum Cottage; and scarcely a day passed but fruit, vegetables, and flowers found their way from the amply stocked conversatories and hot-houses of the Court into its tiny kitchen.

Mrs. Arundel wept over the offerings, and said they were too much, and she felt she was a burden, but took them nevertheless, and inveigled herself more, day by day, into the confidence of Mrs. Craven. Cecil saw the growing friendship and hated it, but he avoided the presence of the widow

whilst she kept to her own house, and part of her plan, at first, was to vote herself unfit for any society, and only anxious to be buried in solitude, and thus excite the further admiration of her new acquaintance. By-and-by she intended to be forcibly dragged from her seclusion by the entreaties of Mrs. Craven, so that her entry into the Court should not appear to be of her own seeking. In the meanwhile she was a great deal too deep to mention Cecil to his mother, unless the latter introduced his name, when she would scientifically turn the conversation in his praise, but still always professed to smile (sadly of course, Mrs. Arundel could only smile sadly in those days) at the idea of his coming to visit her in her new home, a project which his mother (anxious to screen his apparent impoliteness), used frequently to mention as likely to take place.

"*Me!* dear Mrs. Craven—what should the dear boy want to come and see *me* for? and at such a time. Ah! the days have been when we were all very happy together, but they are past! Youth and cheerfulness

choose similar qualities in their associates, and, but for such as you, dear Mrs. Craven, I am best alone."

Indeed if the mother of Eliza Arundel was at this time existent (a fact not necessary for my story's sake to be unravelled), or if, swallowed up of mortality, she could yet have returned to have a peep at all that went on at this period inside Laburnum Cottage, I doubt if she would have known her own daughter in the new character she had assumed, so new a character indeed to her, that it is an additional proof of her sharpness and aptitude for deception that she could have kept it up as she did, even before a stranger.

And so, both high and low, they each had their closets in which they hid away their skeletons and mysteries wherewith to deceive and mislead their friends; and if the secret machinations of one half the world could only be laid bare to the other half, as this chapter has done those of Mrs. Arundel and Martha Wilson, what a hornet's nest we should live and breathe in!

CHAPTER V.

RACHEL GETS THE WORST OF IT.

Rachel Norreys had been a month in England, and August had faded into September, as she stood one afternoon with an opened letter in her hand, watching apparently for some one's return from the dining-room window of Abbey Lodge. She had altered, since we saw her last, though it was difficult at first to determine where the difference lay. Certainly, she had grown stouter, and her cheeks were no longer pale; but the change was not in these; it showed itself more in the expression of her face, which had lost its look of discontent and weariness, and gained, instead, one of restless anxiety, which appeared never to

allow her to remain quiet. Even as she now stood, alone and unoccupied, the least noise made her cheeks change colour, her head turn, and a nervous action (which was a characteristic of the girl's temperament) observable in her hands. Her beautiful hazel eyes had regained much of their former vivacity, although they could look very soft at times still, and a smile was far oftener seen now upon her arched and dewy lips than a frown upon her brow; for, in a few words, Rachel was far happier at Abbey Lodge than she had ever anticipated being, and she was of too generous a nature to deny the fact, even in her looks. Her sister-in-law and herself were great friends; it was quite impossible to resist the frank, arch playfulness of Christine, nor to avoid catching the infection of her unvarying cheerfulness and good-humour. She would not allow Rachel to be depressed or melancholy; she charmed her out of all such moods by her affectionate persuasion and light-hearted view of trouble. And for all her sister-in-law's short-comings with regard to those inexorable, hard-hearted

bells that would ring so precisely to time, and attention to the various rules laid down by Mrs. Norreys for the edification and distraction of her household, Christine ever had a valid excuse, and was found ready to stand as mediatrix between the offender and offended. In fact, she was nobly carrying out a certain promise extracted from her by her brother in the dusk of a summer's evening. With the old lady Rachel did not get on quite so well, though the fact of her being "Raymond's" wife was sufficient to shield her from more than an occasional mild hint, or a starched and frozen greeting when the trespass had been very flagrant, and often repeated: but she could not help fancying that Mrs. Norreys knew more than she chose Raymond and herself to be aware of; that she guessed at the reserve between them, and that she attributed her son's frequent absence to its real cause—that he was not on the terms that he should be with his young wife. And this surmise, true or otherwise, made Rachel more shy with her mother-in-law than she would have been, and created a

barrier between them. But she could not be reserved with Christine; the nature of the daughter of the house was too sunny to permit of it. She had no idea that anything was wrong between her brother and his wife (her mother was scarcely likely to canvass her own opinions on the subject with so young a woman), and they suited each other exactly. And under her influence, Rachel had parted with the resolution she had come to not to accept her sister-in-law's affection until she had claimed that of her husband. She had parted with several opinions which she had then considered bigoted, since the evening that she crouched against the door of her husband's room, although the phantoms that frequented her path that night had encountered no higher power to lay them, and frequented it still. She no longer feared to sleep in her haunted bed, and laughed within herself at the remembrance of the terror she had experienced, and yet she often laid herself down upon it with a sigh. For if she had acknowledged the folly of some of her determinations, Raymond had not followed her example. He

still maintained the character he had assumed from the first day that he brought his wife home to Abbey Lodge. He rose daily from his uneasy rest upon the little sofa in his room, apparently in the most buoyant of spirits, met Rachel at the breakfast-table armed with laughter and mirth-provoking jests—went about all his business in the same light-hearted manner—spent his evenings, sometimes nearly all his days, abroad, and returning to the Lodge in the same mood that he went, would treat Rachel as if she was a young lady staying in the house, and nothing more. The girl could not understand his present course of action. He never lowered his voice when speaking to her now; he never sighed or looked intensely grave; or if he did so, she neither heard nor saw him. Occasionally he would pay her a compliment on the improvement in her looks, just such a foolish, empty compliment as he might have paid to any chance partner at a ball, and this style of address aggravated his wife more than any other.

"By Jove, Rachel," he would exclaim, on

first encountering her in the morning, "how blooming you look! I told you England would suit you far better than Gibraltar; or have you been expending my substance on rouge? No! really not? Then I must be a deuced lucky fellow to have a wife with a pair of cheeks like that, mustn't I? And when she would say perhaps, in a tone of entreaty, "*Don't*, Raymond," he would provokingly reply, "I had no intention of kissing you, my dear; don't be alarmed;" and send Rachel flying back to her bedroom to disperse the traces of her indignation (and occasionally of her tears) before she encountered the searching glances of her mother-in-law.

She would throw her thoughts back sometimes to the day when they first met at Gibraltar, and the conversation which had taken place between them at that time. Had her husband quite forgotten it, and the story of his faithful love that he had told her then? She could not believe so, and yet it seemed as if he had. A dozen times a day she caught herself wondering at his behaviour, and quite unable to account for

it. She wondered where he went when he passed his evenings away from home; who he saw and associated with, and what he did. She wondered if he really admired and loved her still, or whether he had contrived already to bury all such feelings, and had even forgotten, in so short a time, that once they were.

She wondered if it had been her behaviour alone that had worked such a sudden and a mighty change in Raymond, and conscience whispered that it was. She wondered sometimes if it would last for ever; if all her life was to be spent in company with such indifference; and when this last wonderment came into her heart, her face would redden with a woman's shame at being slighted, and her teeth would set themselves upon the nervous lip beneath them. Raymond had certainly succeeded in awakening her curiosity, but what feeling respecting him would next sway her bosom seemed as yet a dead uncertainty.

She was watching for him on the afternoon on which she is re-introduced to the reader, although, perhaps, she would scarcely

have acknowledged the fact. She had just received a visit from Cecil Craven, who was the bearer of a letter from his mother, inviting herself and her husband to stay at the Court, and the thought of the visit having unsettled her, she felt anxious to have the matter decided. Major Craven, during a long interview, spent with her alone, had so entreated, and coaxed, and persuaded her to induce her husband to accept his mother's invitation, that she had half promised him that she would do her best to comply with his request. And now she was not sure that she had been right in saying so, and she wanted Raymond to come back and put his veto against any such proceeding, and permit her to feel that she was following his wishes and her own at the same moment; for Rachel dreaded the idea of such a visit. For reasons best known to herself, she shrunk from its fulfilment, and had Cecil Craven been less regarded by her than he was, she would never have allowed him to talk her over as much as he had done. But anxious for her company himself, he had been traitor enough to hold out the fact of

Mrs. Arundel's proximity to the Court, as a further inducement to allure Rachel under the shadow of his mother's roof. In the meanwhile she felt tolerably easy about the matter; Raymond appeared so little interested now in anything that concerned herself, he seemed to care so little for her society, or her wishes, that it was easy to conjecture that he would resist the idea of giving up his town amusements and companions to accompany his wife upon a visit in the country. She was so busy ruminating upon his past and present conduct, and the probabilities of the issue of his decision upon the project in question, that some one entered the room before she had been aware of a footstep in the hall. She turned quickly as she heard it, and encountered the (to her) uninteresting physiognomy of Mr. Alexander Macpherson. This young gentleman and Rachel had not taken kindly to one another. She was very quick at reading character, and the selfishness, causeless jealousy, and ill temper of poor Christine's fiancé, combined with his obstinacy in any argument which related to his native land, had

impressed her unfavourably from the first, and she had often secretly compared his conduct (and at a great disadvantage) with that of another gentleman of her acquaintance.

He, on his part, had also felt a want of attraction towards Rachel, but this feeling arose, not from any ill qualities he had observed in her, so much as from the jealousy he experienced at the interest that Christine appeared to take in her new sister, and Rachel's fascinations, both of mind and person, had formed the subject of many a drawn battle between the engaged pair, ever since the former had set foot in Abbey Lodge. If Christine ventured, in Rachel's absence, to admire the colour of her eyes or hair, or to make a remark upon her singing or conversation, Mr. Macpherson was ready to affirm that her eyes were not hazel, but brown—a common every-day brown—and Christine might call Mrs. Raymond's hair chestnut if she liked, but if his opinion had been asked upon the subject, he should have pronounced it plain red, and nothing else.

"But your opinion has not been asked," Christine would cry; "and if Rachel's hair is red, you ought to admire it all the more, since red is the favourite Scotch colour." Then her lover's face would inflame, and his eyes grow perfectly round, as he attempted to imbue the mind of his hearer with the fact that there was no more red hair in Scotland than in either of the sister countries, and that what Christine termed so, he supposed, was something of the same colour as what he bore on his own head. And Christine would answer slyly that Alick's hair *was* a little red, now she came to look at it; but, at all events, he would allow that there was not the slightest resemblance between his and that of her sister-in-law.

"Always your sister-in-law," Mr. Macpherson would exclaim. "I never can come in here now for a quiet talk with you, Christine, but you are close closeted with Mrs. Raymond Norreys, talking secrets; or she comes, or your brother does, and sits in the room with us; and if by happy chance they are both absent, you indulge me with

a list of their various perfections : you seem to think of nothing else."

"I am sure that's not true," the girl would answer, as she drew nearer to her offended lover, and laid her frank, warm clasp in his. "There is one person I think of a great deal more, Alick ; but you cannot expect, dear, with Raymond and Rachel staying in the house, that we should be as often alone as when there was no one but mamma to interrupt us. You would not have them banished from the sitting-rooms, would you ?"

"No ; but you need not be appealing to Mrs. Norreys' opinion upon every subject, or running after your brother each time he leaves the room."

"That is not my custom, Alick," Christine would answer, proudly ; "you are unfair."

"There you go, wanting to pick a quarrel with me again, Christine. I never hear you attack your new friends after that fashion. I believe you like them better than you do me. I suppose you are tired of me."

Christine was so used to give in in every-

thing to the man before her, to consult his wishes, and to wait upon his will, that her mother, reared in a stricter school for propriety, was wont to say that she went too far sometimes, and that her assiduity to give him pleasure was unmaidenly. Christine did not mind such rebukes: she loved Alick Macpherson, and she liked to prove to him that she did so, by acquiescing in all he said or wished; but after that—knowing that as she did, it was hard to hear him speak as he had done, and bear it patiently; and patience was not one of Miss Norreys' virtues.

"That is not true," she would exclaim, "and you know it, Alick." And then one of the pitched battles I have alluded to would commence, and end by Mr. Macpherson jumping up and leaving the house, and Christine seeking the shelter of her own room in which to indulge her tears.

"And for such a little thing," she would repeat despondently, after each fresh outbreak on her lover's part; "our quarrels always seem to spring from nothing at all. I suppose I *must* be the one in the wrong;

but Alick appears to me to come now-a-days armed with contradiction for everything one says. I *will* be more patient next time; I will listen to everything, and not answer a word, and then it will be impossible for him to fall out with me." And she would make fierce resolutions on the subject, only to break them the next time Mr. Macpherson appeared and recommenced his system of petty and uncalled-for reproach.

Rachel had found her weeping once or twice, and easily drew the reason from her; and—

"What shall I do, dear Rachel?" Christine would question through her tears.

"*Do?*" the other had exclaimed, indignantly. "Get up and leave the room next time he begins any of his nonsense; and if he chooses to leave the house, write and tell him he need not trouble himself to return. Fancy allowing a man to give himself such airs!"

But poor Christine would look so horrified at the bare idea of treating her promised lord and master in such a nonchalant fashion, that Rachel saw that it was not very likely

her sister-in-law would put her seasonable advice into effect.

Therefore, on the afternoon in question, when Rachel turned at the sound of the opening of the door, and only saw Mr. Macpherson before her, she made a gesture of impatience, and said, rather curtly—

"I thought you were Raymond."

"Did you, Mrs. Norreys?" he replied. "Well, you can lay by your disappointment for another time, because he is just behind me. We arrived together."

But hearing that her husband was close at hand appeared to be sufficient for Rachel, for her manner changed instantaneously from anxiety to one of indifference, and she left the window and was seated, and affecting to make herself agreeable to Mr. Macpherson by the time that Raymond followed him into the room. Of the entrance of the latter she appeared not to take the slightest notice, though a close observer might have observed a certain nervous twitching of the lips which were addressing their conversation to Mr. Macpherson.

"Such a lovely day, has it not been?

Did you only arrive just now? Have you seen Christine yet?"

"No, I have not," he replied. "Here is your husband, Mrs. Norreys, if you want to speak to him."

"She is in her bed-room, working," said Rachel, continuing the subject of her sister-in-law, "or was, when I last saw her. Shall I call her for you, Mr. Macpherson?"

He was quite taken aback by her unusual politeness, and stammered out something about having come to dinner, and begging her not to disturb Miss Norreys on his account. But Rachel swept past him and Raymond, and left the room without vouchsafing a look to the latter, although he had been absent since the morning.

It was nearly time to dress for dinner, and she did not meet her husband again until the whole party assembled in the dining-room. Then there appeared no difference between his behaviour to her and that of Alick Macpherson: he might have been a gallant, attentive friend, and nothing more.

The conversation at dessert turned upon

the subject of honour. There had been a question about it relative to some act of an acquaintance of the Norreyses, and the topic was freely commented upon by the whole party.

"But, after all, what *is* honour?" exclaimed Raymond Norreys. "What one man calls by that name his neighbour denounces as dishonourable; and if we attend to the laws that society has framed for us in that respect, we shall never arrive at a satisfactory solution of the question."

Mr. Macpherson was about to prove, by some irrefragable argument of his own, that the only true and reliable code was the one that Scotchmen are guided by, when Rachel forestalled his intention of speaking.

"Surely," she said, and as if she appreciated her opportunity, for she admired her husband's powers of argument, and liked to draw him into a discussion, "that must be honour, Raymond, which each one of our consciences can assure ourselves in any case is the most straightforward, the wisest, and the best course to pursue."

"Not always," he replied. "An action

may be perfectly open, very wise, and the best thing possible for ourselves, and yet very dishonourable towards another person."

"I don't understand you," she said, quickly.

The rest of the party seemed as interested as herself in the discussion, and waited eagerly for Raymond's answer.

"We cannot measure honour by the estimate of the world," he replied. "A man who has engaged himself to marry a girl is called 'dishonourable' if he breaks his faith with her; whereas he may have ascertained, from sounding his own feelings on the subject, that to fulfil his promise by marriage would be not only foolish, and the worst thing he could do, but a deliberate act of deception, by misleading the woman as to the amount of regard he entertains for her. In such an instance, Rachel, your ideas on the subject would not hold good."

"I see they would not," she answered.

"If a woman leaves the protection of a husband she does not profess to love, she is esteemed 'dishonourable;' but if the same

woman remained at home to plague his life out of him, her conduct would pass muster with the world, although she took refuge beneath the very bond which she knew he could not sever, and turned it into a scorpion to sting him."

But righteous Mrs. Norreys became horrified at the turn the conversation was taking.

"My dearest Raymond,"' she exclaimed, "you surely would not advocate, under any circumstances, a rupture of the nuptial tie?"

"The woman who has sworn before God to love, honour, and obey the man she marries," continued her son, taking no notice of her interruptive question, "may give him only half what she promises, or a quarter, or none; but as long as she stays beneath his roof the world dubs her an honourable wife. But she cheats him, nevertheless; and I have never heard that cheating comes under the head of an honourable action. Does it agree with your interpretation of the word, Rachel?"

He looked her full in the face as he put

the question, and she could not return his glance or answer him; and she was most thankful when she heard the clear, untroubled voice of Christine raised in a playful rebuke.

"What nonsense you talk, Raymond! As if any one ever thought cheating honourable!"

"Well, I don't know," he rejoined; "I dare say there are plenty of such cheats in the world, who think themselves true men and women."

"Now my idea is, that real honour is embodied in the precept to render to every one his due."

It was Mrs. Norreys who had spoken, and Raymond answered her.

"Bravo, mother! I believe you have hit the right nail on the head, after all. 'To every one his due.' But, then, people have such different ideas upon the subject."

The dinner was concluded, and as he spoke the ladies rose to leave the table, thereby greatly disappointing Mr. Macpherson, who had been silently preparing a most eloquent speech upon the matter in

question, and had already been baulked more than once of putting his ideas into words. As Raymond held the door open for the ladies, he tried hard to gain a peep at Rachel's face, to see what effect his words may have had upon her; but she passed him with downcast eyes, and there was no sign to be gathered from the long glories of her lowered lashes.

"What! going out again to-night, Raymond?" exclaimed Christine, reproachfully, half an hour later, as, Mr. Macpherson, having returned to the drawing-room, she descried her brother in the hall, equipped evidently for an evening stroll. "If I were Rachel I would not allow you so much liberty."

Raymond made no reply. He was busily employed lighting his cigar by the hall-lamp, and it was a work requiring skill. His wife was descending the staircase at the time: she did not make any remark upon his proposed absence, but, coming forward, said—

"Raymond, Major Craven was here this afternoon, and brought me a letter from his

mother, asking us to go and stay at the Court as soon as we conveniently could. What answer shall I send?"

"Say we'll go," he replied, with his mouth full of cigar.

"I don't particularly wish to go," faltered Rachel.

"Oh, nonsense!—why not? Nice change for you. I should like to see Craven Court. Accept, by all means."

"Really—are you serious?" she asked, earnestly.

"Certainly. What is your objection to the plan?"

"Oh, I have none—that is, none in particular—I do not much care," she replied, with a degree of hesitation. He saw she did not like the idea; but not to humour her was one of the rules he had laid down for himself, and so he said, with apparent indifference—

"Well, if you don't care, *I do*. I should like it above all things; so consider it settled. We will fix the time to-morrow. *Au revoir*."

And Raymond sauntered out of her pre-

sence and the house, as if in all the world he had not a care to trouble him, his cigar between his lips, his whole appearance one of unstudied content.

And she looked after his retreating figure as the hall-door slammed behind him, with her eyes fixed and her hands fast clasped together; and when he had vanished she gave one deep, long sigh, and then, half-frightened lest it had been overheard, fled back to the drawing-room and its company.

And Raymond, having slammed the door and skirted the covered pathway, turned before he passed through the iron gates, and paused a moment as he looked towards the lighted house. Where and to whom were his thoughts wandering as he cast that farewell upward glance? Did he long, as he did so, that his place also were there, inside that cheerful house, instead of in the stranger night, seeking false amusements to keep up the show of falser pride. Any way, if it existed, he did not follow up his wish, for another second saw him in the crowded thoroughfare, and of the crowd,

as the woman he thought of tried to make herself agreeable in his mother's drawing-room. She had no heart when there to reply to her sister-in-law's playful banter on her husband's absence, and threats that he was already tired of her. She had no spirit to play or sing; and what she managed to accomplish in that way was flat, tame, and unprofitable. Her thoughts were too much with the letter in her pocket, and the wonderful idea, which she could not yet bring home to herself, that she was really going to pay a visit to Craven Court. For though she had made a private resolution against any such proceeding, she did not clearly see her way to carry out what she knew to be best and most prudent. She had no reasonable excuse to give Raymond for her dislike to the projected plan; indeed, apparently there was every cause existent why she should welcome the renewing of her intercourse with friends who had been formerly so kind to her. Therefore since she might not speak, and could not lie, Rachel felt that the proposed visit was a part of her fate, and that, as it was

impossible to avoid it, she must meet it as best she could. But how to meet it occupied all her thoughts; and wrapt in imaginary scenes and conversations, she was so lost in reveries all the evening, that Mr. Macpherson must have been amply satisfied, this night at least, with the non-interference of his flirtations with Christine. And Rachel, for her part, was equally glad when the prayer-bell startled her from her half-waking trance, and announced the approach of the time when she might retire to the solitude of her own room. But once there, she did not seem inclined to seek her bed. Having exchanged her evening attire for a loose dressing-gown, she rather appeared settling herself for an uninterrupted perusal of one of the novels which young ladies are so fond of studying at unearthly hours — late at night and early in the morning; for with her loosened hair in shaken masses down her shoulders, and her pretty little feet, thrust into coquettish red slippers, hoisted on another chair, Rachel sat herself down, close by her dressing-table, and commenced to read; — not so

attentively though, that the least sound in the now silent house could not fail to attract her notice; but none such came for nearly an hour more. Then a slight metallic noise was distinguishable below, as the pass-key that had opened the iron gates did the same office for the oaken door, and Raymond's footstep sounded in the hall.

Rachel laid down her book as it reached her ear, hastily blew out her candles, and coloured painfully, although but in the dark. She heard it mount the stairs, pause for one little moment next her door, and then pass onward to the dressing-room. She did not move or make the smallest stir, but sat there, almost breathless, quite unoccupied, except in intently watching the ray of light which now found its way between the crevices of the partition which divided them. When that was gone—and Raymond Norreys, with a man's promptitude, did not take long to undress, she rose, first leaving her slippers on the floor, and commenced to grope her way towards—her bed?—No! towards the door which parted her room from Raymond's! She seemed to

know her way there well, too, as she placed one naked foot before the other noiselessly upon the steps which led to it. And when she reached it, Rachel did not pause, but placed her arched, red lips—those fresh lips which Raymond had never yet dared to claim — upon the door, and sighing, "God bless you, Raymond!" left a kiss upon the hard unyielding wood, to consecrate her blessing. Ah! if he could but have seen and heard that which was being acted so near to him, how much unhappiness it might have spared them both! But Raymond was—if not already asleep—too unsuspecting and too drowsy to have caught so soft a whisper, and Rachel crept to her bed with an echo of her blessing on her lips, and slept beneath its influence till the morning.

CHAPTER VI.

MAID BELOW AND MISTRESS ABOVE.

As Mrs. Watson, the housekeeper of Craven Court, sat in her own little room, about a fortnight or three weeks after the events related in my last chapter, there came a knock at her door. Now when Mrs. Watson had finished her arrangements for the Court dinner, seen that the dessert was tastefully laid out, and ordered a "little something hot" to be made ready for her own supper, she was used to retire from the cares of public life to the privacy of the housekeeper's room, and indulge in an afternoon nap; and when this was the case it never pleased her to be disturbed; for she was of a gross and corporeal nature, and given to

somnolency; and the hirelings under her knew better than to rouse her from a state of drowsiness, for her ruffled temper made them remember the offence for the whole day afterwards, and was the cause of various raids on her part upon their private belongings and occupations, in order to fill up the spare time. Mrs. Watson had just composed herself for sleep in a huge armchair, with her front pushed to one side and a pocket-handkerchief spread over her face to keep off the flies, when the tap sounded at her door on the afternoon in question, and she was in anything but a beaming temper as she rose to unlock the entrance to her sanctum, and not in the least mollified when she perceived the intruder was Caroline Wilson, the mother of the new under-housemaid. "She wanted no mothers of her maids," as she had often said before, "a-coming bothering at all hours of the day, and prying into her treatment of them." So her voice was not exactly honeyed sweetness as she inquired—

"Lor, Mrs. Wilson! what brings you here?"

"I took the liberty of stepping over, ma'am, to ask how you were, and to have a chat, if you've no objection," replied Caroline Wilson, who, not appearing to notice that the housekeeper's milk of human kindness had turned rather sour with the heat, entered the room as she spoke.

Mrs. Watson could not positively eject her visitor, and so she returned to her own seat, and replied—

"Well, Mrs. Wilson, this is not my usual hour for seeing of friends, but if so be you have any reason for wishing to see me this afternoon, of course I won't say you no."

"You are very good, I'm sure," rejoined Mrs. Wilson, quietly seating herself; "you find this weather warm, ma'am, I dare say?"

"I do find it so; I don't deny it," said the housekeeper, whose face was the colour of beetroot, as she flapped her handkerchief against it for a fan. "Were you wanting to see your daughter, Mrs. Wilson?"

"No, ma'am, thank you; I saw her as I came in."

"Wanting to speak of her, may be?"

was the next inquiry. Mrs. Watson was determined to get rid of her visitor at any cost.

"Well! I can't say but what I did come with the intention of saying a few words to you on the subject of Martha, Mrs. Watson. I hope she gives you satisfaction, so far."

"I haven't had occasion to find grievous fault with her yet, Mrs. Wilson; Martha ain't a bad gal by any means. She's young and flighty; but all girls are that. She does her work pretty well, though it's plain to see she hasn't been used to house-cleaning; but I've nothing in particular to say against her, Mrs. Wilson, ma'am, and that's the truth, excepting, perhaps, that I'd be better pleased if she didn't get such a sight of letters, for they always upsets a gal more or less; but lor'! it's a great charge, having them ten female servants under one, and I often feel as if it was breaking of me down; —the constant worry and talk that I have to keep them to their work—you wouldn't believe it, Mrs. Wilson!"

But Mrs. Wilson had an object in not discussing thus readily the topic she had introduced.

"You don't find Martha wanting too much leave, ma'am, do you?" she next inquired.

"She only gets her turn out, with the others," replied the housekeeper; "once every three Sundays they have half the day, and I find it's quite enough to unsettle them. Now I come to think of it, your gal did ask me for leave one day last week, and I refused it, and she had a bit of a cry; but they all does that directly they're crossed. I don't take no notice of them when such is the case."

"And she had a Sunday out the week before last?" rejoined Mrs. Wilson.

"I think she did," said Mrs. Watson. "I suppose 'twas the turn for the three housemaids; they generally go of a lot."

"Do you know where she went to, ma'am?"

The housekeeper's eyes and hands went heavenwards simultaneously.

"Lor' bless you, woman!" she exclaimed, forgetting her politeness in her surprise, "You don't suppose I can keep count of where they all go for their holidays, down

to the scullion who came off the parish. I should have a pretty piece of work of it if I did. I don't know where your gal went to; I didn't ask. She came back to her time. I supposed as you, her mother, was close at hand, that she'd go, maybe, and sit the afternoon with you. 'Twas nothing to me whether she did or no; I never dictate to my gals when they're once out of the house. They wouldn't mind me if I did. If they misbehave themselves, I turn 'em out.

"I hope my Martha will never do that, ma'am," said Mrs. Wilson, seriously. She felt serious: she had ascertained that Martha had had a holiday since she had been housemaid at the Court, and that she had spent it in London, no one knew where, or with whom—most probably in the same company she had gone up from Aldershot to join. Her mother instinctively guessed that there must be some love affair at the bottom of this secrecy; and she remembered her own experience, and trembled for her daughter. Only she did not go the right way to work to bring into sub-

jection a self-willed, passionate girl, who had been used to act and think for herself.

"Might I ask you a favour, ma'am?" she said, after she had sat a few minutes in silent thought.

Mrs. Watson was not good at granting favours, but she replied, "Certingly, Mrs. Wilson; though I can't promise beforehand as it's yours."

"I only want you to be so kind as not to give my girl any leave, except at her regular times, and to tell her, as from yourself, ma'am, that she's not to have her holiday then if she doesn't spend it with me; for she's too young to be running about anywhere by herself."

Mrs. Watson felt as if the request was an imputation upon her capabilities as overseer of the morals of her maids, and answered, accordingly, "Well, Mrs. Wilson, ma'am, I had no intention of giving your gal more holidays than other gals, but I've no objection to tell her so far as you've asked me to do, provided you don't expect me to see that Martha carries it out; for I have quite

enough bother with them in-doors, and can't be expected to look after them when they're not under my eye."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Wilson; "and thank you kindly, Mrs. Watson, for what you've promised. My daughter is as good a girl as ever was—that I believe; but she's young, and——"

"And I suppose you're afraid of her running after the men. Lor, Mrs. Wilson! you take my advice; let her run; 'tis their nature, and you can't stop it, try all you may. I've had seven daughters, ma'am, as I sit here, and I was so plaguey particular about the first three I wore my life out a-looking after them; but 'twasn't a bit of use. They had each of them a score or two of lovers before they could settle which to have, and as soon as I'd got 'em to give up one man they took to another; and so I fell sick of it, and let the four little ones do as they chose, and they made up their minds in half the time when they were left to themselves, and were married almost as soon as their sisters. It's no use fretting about a gal having lovers, ma'am. You

might just as well try to bring 'em up without meat."

And to look at Mrs. Watson as she delivered herself of this opinion, one would have imagined she was the easiest-going, most lenient-tempered woman in the world. The fact is, she was exceedingly lazy, and made up for her own deficiencies by an occasional outburst of anger against her maids (as she had done in times past against her daughters) for the shortcomings which a little foresight and diligence on her own part might have altogether prevented. But Caroline Wilson, with all her bad qualities, had the gift of circumspection, and too vivid a remembrance of the wrongs of her youth, to contemplate her daughter falling into bad company with equanimity; so she only answered—

"And your advice is very good, I'm sure, ma'am, and you deserved to settle your daughters well; but I have only got this one girl, you see, and I'm afraid she might marry away from me—perhaps take a soldier, as I did (which is the greatest mistake a woman can make, Mrs. Watson),

and leave her father and me for some of those horrid foreign stations."

"Well," rejoined her auditor, who began to feel drowsy again, "some day you must drop in, Mrs. Wilson, and tell me a little about them strange places as you've been to; but I'm sorry I can't ask you to stop this afternoon, as we've visitors coming to the Court to-day, and I've a great deal to do in consequence; for my mistress she never told me of them till this morning."

"Who may they be?" inquired Caroline Wilson, rising as she put the question.

"Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Norreys. Her name was Browne. When she was a little girl she was often here, running about the place."

"Lor!—*she!*" exclaimed Mrs. Wilson.

"What, do you know her?" said the housekeeper, roused into curiosity by the other's surprise.

"Know her!—I should think I did," replied Mrs. Wilson; "her pa was in my regiment. Why, I lived with him (the doctor that was) till he died. And this Mrs. Norreys;—isn't she a queer one!—

couldn't I tell you one or two things about her and your young gentleman upstairs, Mrs. Watson!"

"*Never!*" exclaimed the housekeeper. "What, of she and Mr. Cecil? You don't say so!"

"Yes, I do," replied Mrs. Wilson, nodding her head oracularly. This last tremendous assertion had quite roused the housekeeper from her tendency to sleep: she was quite awake now, and her visitor began to assume an appearance not only of importance but of interest in her eyes.

"Lor, Mrs. Wilson!" she said, "you take my breath away! And Mrs. Craven, she seems to think such a lot of this young lady; she always did. 'The best bedroom, Watson, mind!' she says to me this morning; and then she gives me a pair of white and gold vases from her own dressing-room mantelshelf, and tells me to place them in the best bedroom, which has a couple of the loveliest candlesticks you ever see there already, besides a nasty naked figger, and is trimmed with blue satin damask throughout. Well, I never!"

"Ah! if she knew as much about her as *I* do!" said Mrs. Wilson, mysteriously.

"I suppose you couldn't stop to tea with me this evening, Mrs. Wilson, could you?" said the housekeeper, suddenly and wonderfully interested in the person who a few minutes before she was trying her best to get rid of. "I haven't much to do upstairs, after all, beyond giving the girls a few directions; and then we might have a quiet cup together, and drink to our better acquaintance. I think you are quite right with regard to what you said just now about your Martha, and you may be sure I shall take the first opportunity of speaking to her as you wish, and telling her that her days out are to be spent along of her mother; you may rest assured of that, Mrs. Wilson. And now you'll stop to tea with me, won't you? for it's stupid work, sometimes, sitting here alone, with not a soul to speak to, whilst Mr. Henderson is waiting above stairs."

"Well, I don't mind if I do," returned her visitor; "and thank you for the offer,

Mrs. Watson. My mistress is here for the day herself; and so, when I've just run back and given Miss Emily her tea, I shan't be wanted at home; and that I'll do at once."

"And don't be long," was the parting entreaty of her hostess, as Caroline Wilson proceeded to put her intention into execution.

She was burning to know what the sergeant's wife had to say about the expected visitor and her young master, and awaited her return with the greatest impatience. Mrs. Watson had lived in the Craven family for many years: she had been there in the lifetime of the husband of her mistress, and many things had happened since then that she knew were strange, but that she could not understand. She had been surprised at Mrs. Craven's evident anxiety to promote the comfort of the coming guests, just as she had experienced the same feeling when Rachel Browne, as a little girl, paid visits to the Court, and was attended to as if she had been a princess royal. Now she felt quite anxious

to impart all she knew on the subject to Mrs. Wilson, and hear what she had to say in return, in hopes that some connection might be traced between the stories about Cecil Craven and Mrs. Norreys, and the interest which his mother had ever taken in the daughter of her old friend and lover. And when Caroline Wilson reappeared, her tongue tipped with its best venom—as it ever was when Rachel's name was under discussion—you may be sure the two women enjoyed their cup of tea together and their dish of scandal to their hearts' content.

In the meanwhile, the drawing-room above was not without its occupants, nor they without their occupations. At the farther end of it, reclining in one of those pretty low chairs without arms, that show off a lady's dress to such advantage, close by one of the windows, and half hid by its lace curtains, was Lady Frances Morgan. At first sight she appeared to be alone, indulging in "maiden meditation," though not perhaps quite "fancy free;" but on closer inspection, a very light pair of trousers

and a very light coat, surmounted by a very light head of hair and et ceteras, could be discerned behind the fellow-curtain, the contents of which (the "which" alluding to the coat and trousers) were supposed to be employed in helping to sort some lambs' wool, but in reality were busy in making sheep's eyes, which, after all, is only another and a pleasanter phase of the same occupation. Away from this amorous pair, and with her back towards them, sat Mrs. Arundel, the forlorn widow, who having consented to join the party at the Court for the first time a few days before, had already established herself there on so free-and-easy a footing, that she appeared to be as much in Mrs. Craven's house as she was in her own. But to-day, of course, as her dear friend Mrs. Norreys was expected, she had made a point of being there to welcome her, and seeing that the subject pleased Mrs. Craven, had taken every opportunity that day to gush over in praise of the coming visitor, and to assure her that Rachel and herself had been as inseparable as sisters.

The mistress of Craven Court appeared that afternoon, of any there, to be the least at home. She had not sat still for ten consecutive minutes during the entire day. No sooner had she entered the drawing-room and tried to compose herself, book or work in hand, but something or some thought seemed to rise up in her mind, and take her restless body once more up the stairs or down the stairs, or anywhere, so that it did not keep still. Every now and then her handsome face, crowned with point-lace and coquettish knots of ribbon (which was Mrs. Craven's idea of a cap), would peer into the drawing-room and as quickly be gone. At such times Cecil would stay his badinage with Lady Frances Morgan, and look after his mother's figure, with a glance that was half anxious and half melancholy. Once he rose, followed her into the antechamber, and gave her there so warm and affectionate a kiss that it brought the tears into her eyes. Was it that the expectation of seeing Rachel Norreys brought the memory of the old days, when the girl's father had been her most faithful lover, too

keenly for her peace before this woman of the world? Could it be that Margaret Craven had loved that dead man better than she did any other out of the multitude of those who wooed her? Perhaps so—but only perhaps—Heaven knew best what secrets dwelt in Margaret Craven's breast, for to all outward show she lived without a confidant or comforter.

Expectation is seldom a pleasant work, even when the thing we wait for is an every-day occurrence, and the whole party experienced symptoms of relief when the wheels of the carriage, which had been sent to meet the Norreyses at the railway station, were heard approaching the house.

Mrs. Craven was in the drawing-room at the time, and as the sound struck her ears, made a movement as if to fly; but, checking herself, stood where she had been on first hearing it, unmovable. Cecil started to his feet, and advanced to receive his mother's visitors; Lady Frances was all anticipation, and Mrs. Arundel had just exclaimed—"Here they are, at last, dear Mrs. Craven," when Rachel Norreys and her hus-

band were in their midst. To the two friends who knew Rachel best it was very evident that she had been suffering on her way to Craven Court, for there was a peculiar wild look in her eyes which never appeared there unless her mind was harassed. But Lady Frances and her hostess saw nothing, except the graceful little figure, the large liquid orbs, and the look of startled uncertainty, which always gave Rachel, on finding herself amongst strangers, that deer-like appearance which was one of the most striking of her personal characteristics.

She advanced towards Mrs. Craven first, as in duty bound, with a timid gesture, as if uncertain what reception, after these many years, she should receive at her hands; and the hostess appeared almost as bashful as her visitor. But it was only the uncertainty of a moment; in another, Rachel was folded in her arms, and embraced with almost a mother's fervour.

"My *dear* child!" was the warm greeting she received. "I am so delighted to have you here; I have never forgotten your little face since we parted last!" In her pleasure

at seeing again the daughter of her old friend, in the mixed feelings that Rachel experienced at this reception from Cecil's mother, they both seemed to have forgotten the existence of the other members of the party. But Mrs. Craven, being the oldest, and remembering herself first, held out her hand with a smile over Rachel's shoulder, to greet Rachel's husband, saying—

"A thousand welcomes, Mr. Norreys—for this dear girl's sake!" and then Rachel disengaged herself from her embrace, and proffered hers also for Cecil's acceptance. The firm pressure with which he held it told her more than volumes of protestations on his part could have done how much he felt with her; but she had barely time to return it, and to make a graceful acknowledgment of the introduction which Lady Frances received to her at Mrs. Craven's hands, when there was an exclamation, a rush forward, a fervent embrace, and Rachel knew she was in the arms of her bosom friend.

"Chère petite!" exclaimed that lady, who found her abominably mutilated French beginning to be useful again. "What

pleasure to see you again, my darling Rachel! What happy days we shall have together. Ah! I dare say you little thought to meet your poor Elise at the Court, now did you? but you shall hear all about it in good time. I dare say you are tired to death just now, after your nasty railway journey. Let me take you to your room, dearest." And Mrs. Arundel appeared as confident of this being the right thing for her to do, as if Craven Court and all its belongings were her property alone. Mrs. Craven commenced something to the effect that she would not hear of her taking that trouble upon herself; but the widow interrupted her in the midst of her speech.

"Now, dear Mrs. Craven, in this particular I must just have my own way. You've been trotting about all day and are quite tired out. No! *no! no!* I will not hear of it. You see I can be very obstinate when I choose. Now, dearest Rachel, I know all about your room, and if you'll follow me, I will take you to it in no time."

Rachel was half disposed to remonstrate

against this hasty proceeding, but glancing towards Mrs. Craven, the latter said—

"Perhaps you had better go, my dear, as your friend is so kind as to offer to show you the way. We dine at six in summer, and your boxes have yet to be unpacked. Cecil will show Mr. Norreys to his dressing-room;" but as Rachel left the room she caught a glimpse of the faces of Cecil and Lady Frances, and they were both replete with unmitigated disgust at the officiousness of Mrs. Arundel.

"Fancy whisking Mrs. Norreys off in that fashion," pouted Lady Frances in a whisper to Major Craven, as the two ladies left the room, "and when I wanted so much to speak to her!"

"You shall have plenty of opportunities to do so if I can manage them," he whispered, in reply; "for I'll get that widow out of the house by hook or by crook, or my name's not Craven." For these two had already established a regular feud against Mrs. Arundel, which only had the effect, however, of making her more bitter against them than she would have otherwise been,

and more determined to have her revenge. As she got Rachel safely into the blue damask bedroom, and the latter commenced to make arrangements for dressing, Mrs. Arundel began to be communicative.

"Well, darling! so you've come at last. I really thought that you were never going to give us that pleasure. Isn't this a charming place? but I suppose you remember it. Such grounds, and such a table kept! I'm here almost every day. Now don't you be jealous, you naughty puss; but dear Mrs. Craven *will* have it so, and I am not in a condition, alas! to refuse an offer of friendship like hers. Not but what I shall *always, always* love my sweet Rachel the best of all my friends." And here the friend in question had to stay her unpacking to endure a very demonstrative hug, intended to illustrate the above theory. "Well, dear Rachel, and how are you getting on at Brompton with la belle mère, and la belle sœur? to say nothing of Monsieur votre mari? Tolerably, eh? No pitched battles, etc.?"

If Rachel had been engaged in such, day after day, Mrs. Arundel was no longer the

person she would have chosen to confide her defeat to. And so she merely answered: "No, indeed; I should hope not. You speak of pitched battles, Elise, as if they were nothing. I like Abbey Lodge exceedingly, thank you; and my mother and sister-in-law are very good to me, and very kind. Christine is a dear girl."

"That's right; that's right, petite," said her bosom friend, patronizingly. "I thought it would all turn out plain-sailing after a while. You see your Elise knew best, after all, chèrie, did she not?"

But Rachel appeared in no mood for confidence, for she turned the subject.

"How do you like Laburnum Cottage, Elise?"

"Pretty well, dear; it's a poor little place, but as much as I can afford to keep up. You must come and see it, Rachel. *Your friend*, Master Cecil, has not honoured me with a visit there yet. By-the-bye, have you remarked how very épris he is at the present moment with Lady Frances Morgan?"

"I have had no time to remark any-

thing," replied Rachel. "She seems a very pretty girl."

"Oh, yes; she is all very well for those who like neither one thing nor the other; however, for *my* part, Rachel, give me either a regular blonde or a brunette—like our two selves, for instance. However, Major Craven is carrying on a great flirtation in that quarter, any way. Rather a fickle gentleman, is he not?"

"Is he?" said Rachel, carelessly.

"Well, I should have thought *you* ought to have known, my dear," was the flippant reply. All her jealousy of, and desire to supplant Rachel in the heart of Cecil Craven the widow had now transferred to Lady Frances Morgan, and she took care to run down that young lady whenever she had an opportunity of doing so; but she had rather hoped that Rachel would feel Major Craven's desertion as much as she had done herself, and with an amiable feeling, peculiar to women, wanted to rouse her jealousy of him as well.

"Watch them, my dear Rachel, that's all," was her next remark, "and you will soon

see their little game. Not that I believe Craven means anything by it (more shame for him); but she's a little fool, and very easily taken in. Well, I must be running away now, for the first dressing-bell has rung, and I promised dear Mrs. Craven to look in and help her with her hair; such beautiful hair as she has, for a woman of her age, has she not, dear? and I dare say I am keeping *il marito* a prisoner in his dressing-room all this time into the bargain, when, perhaps, he has a thousand things to say to you—so, au revoir, dearest."

And with this last pleasantry the widow disappeared. The news she had imparted to Rachel about Cecil and Lady Frances had no further effect upon her than to make her thoughtful.

"I *shall* watch them," she said to herself, "and see whether what Elise imagines to be the case is true: she may be mistaken. At all events, I cannot think that Cecil would be so ungentlemanly, so dishonourable, so cruel, as to play with any girl's feelings. And if he is in earnest, and intends to marry Lady Frances, I will try—

she looks so sweet and amiable—to make her love me, and to be her friend." And with this resolve, having dressed herself for dinner, Rachel opened the door of her bedchamber and stepped into the passage. It was a wide corridor, running the whole length of the Court, and with doors opening upon either side. As she commenced to traverse it, her light foot-fall making no sound upon its carpeted floor, she saw Cecil Craven standing at the further end, apparently with the intention of waylaying somebody, and as she approached him, and saw the look of pleasant greeting on his face, she could no longer doubt but that the "somebody" was herself.

"I was waiting for you, Rachel," he said, frankly, as he advanced a few steps to meet her. "I want to thank you, oh! so much, for being such a dear, good girl, and doing as I asked."

As she stood before him, robed in her black dress, her radiant hair tied in one huge bunch of curls behind, her swanlike neck and small head giving her an air of such high breeding, how low sank the

beauty of other women before the bewitching graces of this aristocratic-looking girl! Even the outlines of Lady Frances (although she could number princes of the blood royal amongst her ancestors) appeared clumsy in Cecil's thoughts, as he watched Rachel Norreys nervously trying to button a glove upon her small symmetrical hand.

"You *ought* to thank me," she replied in a low voice, "for it has been a great effort."

"I am sure of it," he exclaimed; "it could not be otherwise; and you did it for *my* sake, Rachel, did you not?" And he passed his arm round her slender waist as he spoke.

"Yes," she replied. I did it for your sake, dear Cecil, and in return for all your goodness to me. I have come," she added, with a degree of agitation, "as you asked me to come, but there I feel as if my responsibility ended. You must do the rest for me, Cecil. I am afraid of myself in this house," and she shuddered as she looked round upon the walls of the corridor; "afraid of you—of everybody. I feel as if

I should scarcely ever be able to speak, or dare to do so. Do what you can for me; ward off everything that may prove a temptation. I have promised, I know; but Cecil, I am only a woman. Away, I felt strong; here, I am a very child. By nature I am weak, and rash, and hasty. Be my protector, as you have promised to be, in this as in other things."

"I will, indeed I will," he answered fervently, as he kissed the tears from her eyes. "Look to me, dear Rachel—come to me when you want strength. I am often driven to bay myself, and scarcely know what to do or say; but there is but one course for our pursuance—an oath is sacred."

"I know it," she said, solemnly; "I *feel* it; but the alternative is hard. Oh, father! what is this burden you have laid upon me?"

As she uttered the last words, in a low and plaintive voice, Cecil Craven pressed her more closely to him, and was silent.

The next moment they were far apart, and descending the wide staircase at a respectful distance from each other, for

Raymond Norreys had left his dressing-room, and was advancing to join them.

"I am telling your wife that I shall be able to give you some good shooting here, Norreys, if you like the sport," observed Major Craven.

"Indeed," Raymond Norreys remarked drily; and then added in a pleasanter tone, "I saw you had splendid covers about here as we drove in from Weybridge."

"Yes, and they are just overflowing with game," replied Cecil; "they have been strictly preserved during my absence, and my cousin Northland's is the only gun I have allowed there: we will go out to-morrow. And the two gentlemen engaged in a learned dissertation upon dogs, shot, and guns, and appeared to have forgotten all other topics, as they descended the staircase together and entered the drawing room.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERY SOMEWHERE.

THERE was a gentleman there whom Rachel did not in the least remember to have seen before, although she had often done so in the days of her childhood, and a very strange gentleman she thought him to be, even upon her first acquaintance with him, for he kept bobbing about from behind one lady's skirt to another, as soon as she turned her eyes in his direction, as if he wished to avoid an introduction to her. Cecil Craven and Raymond Norreys were so busy talking together that the former did not seem to notice anything, and it was not until Mrs. Craven appeared to join her guests that the

behaviour of the strange gentleman was commented upon.

"Gus," she said, as soon as she entered the room, and saw him apparently trying to hide himself amongst some sofa cushions at one end of it, "Cousin Gus, have you not shaken hands yet with your little friend Rachel Norreys and her husband?"

Then the strange gentleman advanced almost sheepishly, and giving a hasty salutation to Rachel, turned to Raymond, and almost fastened upon his hand.

"I knew your father, sir," he kept on repeating, as he shook it again and again. "I am exceedingly glad to make your acquaintance, by Jove! I knew your father years ago; we were boys at school together, sir, and lads at college, and I am exceedingly pleased to see you here, Mr. Norreys, by Jove, I am, and—I knew your father so very well. You are very like him, by Jove!" And then he set to shaking poor Raymond's hand again, until it was nearly shaken off. Meanwhile the dinner was announced, and the formalities of society began.

"Cecil, my dear," said Mrs. Craven, "you will take Mrs. Norreys, if you please, and——"

"*That* sounds funny, doesn't it, Rachel?" he whispered, as he took her on his arm, and led the way into the dining-room.

They were quite alone that evening, with the exception of Mrs. Arundel, and the dinner passed off very quietly. Rachel did not talk much; she felt unaccountably timid and reserved, and all efforts to draw her into conversation failed, although Cecil was at her right hand. The ones who talked the most appeared to be Cousin Gus and Raymond Norreys, who kept up the ball famously, and Mrs. Arundel, whose tongue ran incessantly as she alternately addressed Mrs. Craven and Rachel. The latter would not have been so silent but for one circumstance, which occurred so often that at last it was a source of positive distress to her, and this was, that whenever she raised her eyes from her plate, she found those of the strange gentleman (whose name she had now gathered from her right-hand neighbour to be Mr. Northland) invariably fixed

upon her. He always appeared painfully conscious when thus caught—would almost blush in his feeling of awkwardness, and hurriedly withdrawing his gaze, apply himself to eating and talking with such renewed energy, that being in general rather an uncommunicative individual, he quite astonished his relatives. But still the next time that Rachel raised her eyes the same result was sure to ensue, till she grew quite nervous herself, and blushed a great deal more than he did. Once she thought she encountered the eyes of Mrs. Craven turned with displeased surprise upon her offending cousin, but if so, Mr. Northland did not appear to take the hint, for he still continued to stare at the new guest. And somehow, although it confused her, Rachel could not feel very angry at the interest she seemed to have awakened in his breast. The glances he directed towards her were so very far from anything like impertinent curiosity, that they only excited her sympathy in return. His large, soft, brown eyes were so pensive and womanlike in their expression, his whole demeanour so subdued

and melancholy, that she began to experience a feeling of compassion for the stranger before she was aware of it herself. She thought that she should like to know him better—to ask him why he looked at her so earnestly—to learn if he had any grief, or had experienced some great loss of which her face reminded him. She smiled to herself when occasionally roused from such reveries as the above by Cecil asking her to take wine, or Mrs. Arundel from the other side of the table recalling some regimental circumstance to her remembrance, —smiled to think that she should be dreaming of fanciful probabilities respecting a man she had hardly ever seen before that evening, and of whom she knew nothing. All this time Rachel had spoken very little to Mrs. Craven, or she to her. The spell of silence, which seemed at the dinner-table to have affected so many of the party, had fallen upon the hostess also, and she had scarcely joined in the conversation. But when the ladies had retreated to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Arundel, in order to keep up her character of a loving mother

(a character she found very inconvenient at times), had affirmed that she must run home "just for *one* moment to see her sweet Emily safely to bed, if *dear* Mrs. Craven would kindly excuse her," and Lady Frances had wandered away alone upon the terrace at the back of the house, in hopes somebody might see and join her there, Rachel found herself for the first time alone with Mrs. Craven.

She tried to overcome her shyness and appear at ease, and, in consequence, attempted to say something; but the "something" fell flat, and then there was a dead silence between them—broken presently, however, by Mrs. Craven, who, advancing to the sofa where Rachel sat, and taking a seat beside the girl, laid her hand upon hers.

"I hope you are glad to come here, my dear," she said, softly. (And Rachel as softly answered "Yes.") "I knew your dear father many, many years ago—indeed, before you were born, Rachel, and it was a great grief to me to hear of his death. It must have been a great grief to you, my dear."

"Indeed it was," faltered poor Rachel. "I sometimes feel as if I should never get over it."

"Don't say that," said Mrs. Craven, nervously. "You are young, my dear child, and the young soon forget. But he was very kind and good to me in days when we were boy and girl together, and I wish that I could in some measure make up to you, Rachel, for his loss. If you could look on me as on——"

"Oh, no!—oh, no!" exclaimed Rachel, shrinking from her, and hiding her face in her hands, "I couldn't, indeed."

Mrs. Craven uttered a sharp sound, which was almost like a cry.

"Oh, child, don't shrink from me!" she said; "I did not mean to hurt your feelings. I do not suppose you could ever look on me as you have done on him."

"Oh no, indeed," said Rachel again, her face still hidden from the lamplight, "not on you, or on any one!"

"I do not expect it," replied Mrs. Craven, taking no notice of this second interruption; "but if you could look on me as a friend,

Rachel, as your best friend, and promise to apply to me in any trouble, I should be so happy thus to try and pay off part of the great debt I owe his memory. You have no mother, dear child."

"God knows that I have not!" said the girl, sobbing; and her sudden distress seemed greatly to affect her friend.

"Poor, poor child!" she exclaimed, putting her arm around her. "Let me be your mother, Rachel, for *his* sake! I have no daughter." (As she said the words the girl stirred in her embrace uneasily.) "If I had I should have liked her to be just like yourself; the same eyes, the same mouth, the same shade of hair; and having none, and seeing you thus, I feel as if I could love you almost as well as if you had been mine. May I love you, Rachel? May I please myself sometimes by fancying that you are my daughter, and that the day may come when you will look on me as you might have done on your own mother, had she lived?"

"She never lived for me," said Rachel, sadly, though her sobs had ceased.

"I know she did not, Rachel; therefore never having known another, it will be all the easier for you to look on me as such. Is it a bargain?"

"I will *try* to love you," was the reply, in a tone which sounded almost ungrateful. "I cannot promise more."

But Mrs. Craven appeared to be satisfied with the agreement, and kissed her several times in return. And yet this conversation did not make Rachel's timidity, in the presence of the woman who wished to be her friend, less. Indeed, as the days went on, notwithstanding all Mrs. Craven's endeavour to the contrary, it rather seemed to increase than to diminish.

She shrunk from all the attention offered her, as if it hurt her to receive a favour from the hands of her hostess. She frequented her own apartment very much, and when below-stairs, was shy, silent, and retiring. Especially did she seem after that first evening to dread being left alone in Mrs. Craven's company, and the slightest signal of such a calamity was sufficient to send Rachel flying out of the room, into

the garden, or up the stairs,—anywhere, to avoid a *tête-à-tête*. This conduct on her part was observed not only by Mrs. Craven, to whom, with her desire to benefit her old friend's daughter, it gave great pain, but also by others—by Cecil, and Mrs. Arundel, and Raymond Norreys. But at this time Rachel (if she was suffering) suffered alone. If she shrunk from giving her confidence to her hostess, she shrunk as much from her ci-devant bosom friend, Eliza Arundel; for in her heart, with regard to that lady, there was springing up a seed of distrust,—small, indeed, at the present moment, but still there, and incompatible with anything like unreserve. And to her husband Rachel was becoming a mystery. He could understand her former indifference, and even dislike of him; but he could not imagine what should make her now appear nervous and anxious to avoid him, who never pressed his company upon her. What should induce her to blush and falter when she spoke to him, —to tremble if he came upon her suddenly, —to indulge (as he knew she did) in long fits of weeping by night, and melancholy

depression by day? He attributed these signs to her longing to be free from the yoke he had imposed upon her—her aversion to his presence—her despair at the impossibility of regaining her freedom. These thoughts hung heavily upon the heart of Raymond Norreys. Night after night, when his wife imagined he was asleep in his dressing-room, would he be sitting up wide awake, listening to the sobs she tried to stifle with the bed-clothes, and to the pacing of her naked feet upon the carpet,—longing to rush in and comfort her, but not daring to do so, as he thought he was the very cause of her distress. How often he cursed the fate which led him on to enchain the heart and hand of so inexperienced a girl, only to find that what he had secured, though worth nothing, was yet that which neither he nor she could rid themselves of again. If he could have shattered those rivets for her, how soon he would have done it, even had his own heart withered in the process. But they were forged, and no amount of strength nor force of longing could undo the link. It never struck Raymond that Rachel's de-

pression arose, not so much from her dislike of himself as her preference for another. He was too honourable, too upright in his own nature, to suspect his neighbour of faults he would have scorned to commit himself. The best and the truest in the world are always those who are easiest hoodwinked. The man who suspects his wife or his friend at every turn requires looking after himself; and Raymond Norreys was both good and true.

And yet, as if to aid him to suspect, it was to Cecil Craven, and him alone, that Rachel at this time even admitted that she suffered pain, and he (notwithstanding that he was greatly engrossed in his flirtation with Lady Frances) could not help observing, in common with the rest, that her eyes often told tales of her sleepless, restless nights, and that her spirits were not at their usual ebb. And when he noticed the circumstance to her, she never denied it, as to others.

"Of course I am unhappy," she would say, "and you know the reason why, Cecil. Leave me alone, and take no notice of me:

it is the kindest thing you can do. I shall be better when I get back to Brompton."

But, low-spirited as she was, Rachel was not so totally absorbed in her own troubles as to be unable to take any notice of what was going on around her, and one or two things which she observed during her visit to Craven Court puzzled her not a little. Foremost amongst these was Mrs. Craven's treatment of her son. If she had simply idolized Cecil (as many mothers are foolish enough to do when they have but one creature on whom to lavish the riches of their love), Rachel would have thought it only natural; and if, following up this course of action, she had lavished presents without number or reserve upon him, it would still have appeared the most likely thing to happen, possessing the wealth that she did. But, without evincing the first clause, Mrs. Craven carried the second to an extravagant excess. It was not that she did not love Cecil, and dearly (the fact has been already stated); but she did not deify him by any manner of means: on the contrary, with all her care and thought for his com-

fort and happiness, she appeared to, and did, think a great deal more of the intellect of Rachel Norreys than of that of her son. And yet, with respect to lavishing money upon him, and at times most unnecessarily, his mother seemed unusually foolish. Major Craven had a liberal income of his own,—an income which made poorer men wonder why on earth he continued to slave in the army when he might enjoy himself at home. But people's ideas of enjoyment differ, and Cecil's was to follow his profession. Whilst in it, he was celebrated for being the most extravagant officer in the Bays (a regiment not generally quoted for its quiet and economical habits). He had always kept the most valuable horses in his stable, given the best dinners and the most expensive presents of any one in that corps, and, when on leave in England, his mode of living far exceeded in splendour anything which his foreign services could boast of. But Mrs. Craven, instead of checking him in his expenditure (for even thousands come occasionally to an end), only appeared to encourage him in fresh extravagances, by

heaping useless luxuries upon him, and, as far as Rachel could see, without any object in thus indulging him. One particular instance made a deep impression upon her mind. At the period of their visit to the Court, Major Craven had nearly a dozen horses, hacks and hunters, for his groom and himself, located in the stables there. One afternoon the whole party had been looking over his stud, which comprised some very valuable animals, and was well worth seeing; and, whilst discussing their merits at the dinner-table, their owner remarked, carelessly, that he had been very nearly adding to their number the day before, when he had been up in London.

"Such a splendid mare," he said, "one of the Earl of ——'s stud. He wants a stiffish price for her—six hundred pounds; but I defy any one to pick out a fault in the animal's make and disposition. She is perfect."

"Why didn't you buy her, Cecil?" inquired his mother.

"Oh, I don't know," he rejoined, and as if he was perfectly indifferent upon the matter. "There is not a vacant stall in the

stable, in the first place; and I've no use for her, in the second. My horses are all eating their heads off, as it is, and I have to pay men to exercise them. By-the-bye," he added, turning to Rachel, "you said you would ride with me if I got you a lady's horse, and I've found you a beauty. My little grey Arab, mother. We had a skirt on him this afternoon, and he went as quietly as if he had been used to it all his life. You must come out with me to-morrow, Mrs. Norreys."

Nothing more was said on the subject of the Earl of ——'s mare until a few days afterwards, when one morning Cecil exclaimed, abruptly, at breakfast,—

"Thank you, mother, for your present, though I told you I didn't want her. You'll have to keep her in exercise for me now; for I'm hanged if I can do any more in the riding way. I seem to be in the pig-skin from morning till night."

Mrs. Craven smiled, and said, "Nonsense!" and she had hoped he would be more grateful; and Rachel asked what the present might be.

"Why, what should I see," replied Cecil, "when I walked into the stables this morning, but my head groom grinning from ear to ear, and the Earl of ——'s mare (that pretty animal I spoke of the other day,—the 'Queen of Scots' they call her) in the loose box. I asked how she got there, and heard that my mother sent up to London to buy her for me yesterday; though how she managed to find out names, addresses, and prices beats me altogether. And what the deuce I'm to do with the 'Queen of Scots,' now I've got her, I don't know either."

And this was the nonchalant, don't-care style in which Cecil received most of his mother's presents; but Mrs. Craven appeared, on her part, to think it all right so long as he accepted them at her hands: yet why she should throw away six hundred pounds on a horse which her son had positively said he did not care to possess, was past Rachel's comprehension; but this was only one instance out of many such. In the meanwhile Cecil Craven had procured mounts for Lady Frances and Rachel Norreys. And a riding-party being organized,

the four younger people took that exercise almost daily. On such occasions Mr. Northland, being generally absorbed in his meerschaum and dressing-gown, and lost in some of the surrounding shrubberies or garden-paths, Mrs. Arundel would be Mrs. Craven's only companion, and strove to make the time pass quicker by engaging her friend in innocent small-talk.

"How do you think dear Rachel is looking to-day, Mrs. Craven," she commenced at one of these conferences, "better?"

"Is Rachel Norreys ill?" Mrs. Craven questioned.

"Well, not precisely ill, perhaps, but certainly far from what she should be. She was very different formerly. I have known the dear girl for years, Mrs. Craven, as you have heard, and she used to be such a merry, light-hearted creature."

"I have often had her to stay here, as a little girl," Mrs. Craven replied, "and always thought her disposition subject to very fitful changes. Sometimes she was boisterously rude; at others, unnaturally quiet and shy. I never attributed it to any-

thing but her temperament, which is very excitable."

"Ah! perhaps so. As a child I knew nothing of her, of course; but as a woman I have associated with her a great deal. Oh, Mrs. Craven! you should have seen us at Gibraltar—we were inseparable—riding, driving, or walking, your dear son and dear Rachel and myself were like brother and sisters. Exactly—one would have thought to see us—that we were *just that* —brother and sisters."

Her listener started, perhaps at the idea of such a sister for her Cecil as the woman before her, but she only answered—

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed; and if dear Rachel had not been a married lady, I should have been just a little afraid for Major Craven's heart."

Mrs. Craven started again, and this time the cause was evident, for she laid her hand upon the widow's arm, and exclaimed—

"Oh! Mrs. Arundel, pray don't say that!"

The innocent creature laughed lightly.

"My dear Mrs. Craven, pray don't look so frightened. I only said, '*if*' Rachel had not been married; but she was, and so there *could* be no danger. Why, fie! you look quite pale. I'm very naughty to have alarmed you so."

And indeed Mrs. Craven did look quite pale, and overcome from the horrid thought which the widow's words had suggested to her.

"I talk too fast for you," re-commenced that lady, presently, "but you must never think much of anything I say. We military ladies are famous for being rattles, you know. But now that I have said so much, perhaps, I had better finish my little talkee-talkee, and then you will see what small cause there was for alarm. Dear Rachel was married very young, you see, and left many years without her husband (who, I am sure is a most charming fellow, now he's come), and I *must confess*, at *one* time, I was just a *little* afraid, lest Mr. Cecil's handsome face and figure might not be productive of mischief in that quarter (for a woman's heart is an easy prey, dear Mrs.

Craven), but I talked to her once or twice —and——. There—that's all, my dear friend—Rachel is a sweet girl, devoted to me, and a word to her perhaps from my mouth has more effect than twenty would from that of another person. At any rate, no harm was done. Mr. Norreys arrived, claimed his pretty little wife, Major Craven returned home and commenced to court Lady Frances Morgan, and here they all are, as happy as can be."

And here the widow sighed profoundly, as though even in thinking of happiness she dared not trust herself; but there was a devil in the eye to which she gently applied her pocket handkerchief. Yet artful as she was herself, she was quite taken aback by the show of gratitude which Mrs. Craven exhibited on account of the salvation of her son.

With her eyes brimful of tears, she seized the hand of Eliza Arundel, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh! God bless you!" she said, fervently, and more than once, "for what you did for both of them. You have been a friend indeed."

Mrs. Arundel tried to laugh off her confusion at receiving this little homage. "Why, my dear creature," she exclaimed, "you don't suppose that anything could happen to dear Rachel whilst *I* was by, do you? I *should* be a friend worth having otherwise. And really there was nothing to speak of, after all. Rachel is but a thoughtless girl, you know, and very careless of the world's opinion; so, perhaps, is Mr. Cecil, but I don't think it was much talked of."

"Good heavens! it never came to be talked of, did it?" said Mrs. Craven, horror-struck at the idea.

"No, no, dear friend; or if so, soon forgotten. In a regiment, every little trifle is discussed, but do not be afraid for our dear Rachel. I myself, I know, was over anxious and fidgety about the matter, and yet I can laugh at it now, you see. But I positively won't talk to you another minute on the subject, so let us change it at once. How do you like Mr. Norreys?"

"Very much, indeed," returned poor Mrs. Craven, who was still white, and upset from the news she had received. "He seems a

delightful young man, from the little I have seen of him; so animated and full of talk, and very attentive to his wife."

"Ah! so *I* said directly I saw him, and how I had to talk to, and scold that naughty little Rachel, to be sure, for the way she used to go on about that poor fellow before he had even returned."

"Not in abuse of him, I hope?" Mrs. Craven said, with renewed anxiety.

The widow smiled. "Well, I suppose we mustn't say ladies 'abuse' a gentleman when they speak against him; but she was a very naughty, self-willed girl, and used to get into a dreadful state of mind whenever his name was alluded to. But nous avons changé tous cela. They seem very happy together now."

"Do they?" said Mrs. Craven, thoughtfully. "Poor Rachel!"

"Now, my dear friend," resumed her tormentor, "you must not let my little Rachel know that I have mentioned these things to you, or my pet will be angry with me, and that is what I could not bear. Promise me that you will be discreet."

"Certainly I will," replied Mrs. Craven. "In the first place I have not Rachel's confidence; and, in the second, would not think of wounding her feelings unnecessarily if I had. But here they come home from their ride."

From that day Mrs. Craven threw every obstacle that she possibly could in the way of Rachel Norreys joining the riding-party; at the same time that she tried as much as lay in her power to further her son's intimacy with Lady Frances Morgan. The two latter were very anxious that a dance at the Court should be given, and Mrs. Craven was desirous of obliging them; but a difficulty lay in the way, in the shape of Rachel Norreys, who had been promised, if she would accept the invitation, that no festivity should take place there during her stay, in consideration of her deep mourning. But it was now going on for three months since Dr. Browne had died, and Rachel was no stickler for outward forms and ceremonies. She attached no importance whatever to the depth of her mourning, and thought the

whole system of wearing black in most cases so monstrously abused, by being adopted where no tears were shed, that she often wished that society did not so strictly demand its observance. She did not feel inclined for a dance herself, because her heart was still very sore, and so she told her hostess; but she in no way connected it with the memory of her father, and rather than prevent the other young people having their enjoyment, would certainly appear at any entertainment which was given at the Court; and as she was a guest in the house, Mrs. Craven could not have issued cards for one otherwise. But in compliment to her, it was agreed that the dance should only be a "carpet hop," and follow a dinner-party; by that means, appearing less of a pre-arranged festivity than it would otherwise have done. And Mrs. Craven, in settling all this, and talking to Rachel about it, was so considerate of her feelings, and so tender in her mention of her dead father, that her kindness overcame the girl, who burst into tears. Contrary to her late

avoidance of her hostess, they happened that day to be alone, and Rachel could not hide her distress.

"My dear child!" exclaimed her friend, "if the mere thought of it gives you such pain, it shall certainly not be. Consider that settled."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Craven!" was the hysterical answer; "it isn't that, indeed. It is nothing to me if they dance, or sing, or play, so long as *he* is not there. It was only your mentioning his name so kindly that overcame me for a moment. I am all right again now;" and she sat up and passed her hand across her brow, as if she was determined not to break down again.

Notwithstanding the evident restraint which had been lately evinced in the girl's manner towards herself, Mrs. Craven could not but make another attempt to comfort her and gain her confidence.

"My dear Rachel," she said, tenderly, "it makes me very unhappy to see you so. You nurse your grief too much, my dear; you pass bad nights, I can see, and allow sad thoughts to haunt you by day. In

losing your father, I know you lost what you most cared for; but, after all, death is not the greatest affliction that can befall our dear ones, and Heaven never intended the young to weep long for the old. Try to think more of his happiness, my child, and less——."

"It is not that—it is not that at all!" said Rachel, interrupting her with convulsive sobs. "Oh, Mrs. Craven, it is *not* that!"

"Will you not then tell me what it is, dear Rachel?" continued her kind friend, drawing nearer to her; "perhaps if you did, I might be able to comfort you. It has given me pain to see how you avoid me, although I asked your leave to let me look upon you as a daughter, and I feel—believe me, Rachel, I *really* feel, *almost* as if I were your mother. If you could confide in me as you would have done in him who is gone, I might be able to disperse some of the cloud which hangs over you at present: at all events, you would feel that you were deeply sympathised with, from whatever source your trouble springs. What is it, dearest child? Tell me."

But there was no answer to the question, except those deep, deep sobs, which rose from the sofa cushion, where Rachel had buried her face.

"Is it anything to do with your home, Rachel? Anything about your husband?"

Still there was no reply.

"Is it about Raymond, Rachel? You married him too young, my child—(God pardon those who might have saved you from it). *Do you love him?*"

The question had never been put to Rachel before by any friend in England. Mrs. Norreys and Christine had taken it for granted that she did so, Eliza Arundel that she did not; and Raymond himself had never mooted the idea since the first night they had met, and she had answered, "*No!*" But coming as it did now, from almost alien lips, and yet with a true, tender pathos in the inquiry, it seemed to go straight home to the girl's heart. It seemed to force its way there, and make her ask herself the reason of her present trouble; of the new strange feelings which had crept upon her the last few weeks; of her anxiety, her

restlessness, her resentment of her husband's coldness, and thence to wrest a true and honest answer.

And so uplifting her slight form from the sofa-cushion, only to throw it down again with a fresh burst of grief as she thought how little Raymond regarded her, the cry of Rachel was—

"Oh, yes—indeed, I do—indeed, indeed, I do, with all my heart and soul!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. NORTHLAND BECOMES PARTICULAR.

No, she did not lie, although, until that moment when the question was asked her so abruptly, Rachel had had no knowledge of the truth. But she knew now why she felt Raymond's indifference to her so bitterly, and doubly bitter it became after the discovery; she knew why she trembled and shuddered at his approach, and had thought the agitation came from the same feelings of aversion which she had entertained for him upon their first acquaintance. She knew—she felt she *loved* him; and knowing that, how far more loveable did he appear in her enlightened eyes. Filled with the sunshine that had burst in upon

her soul, she began to fear lest Raymond should read by it her heart as plainly as she did herself; and, fearing so, became more timid in his presence than she had ever been before. But Mrs. Craven knew nothing of all this. When Rachel's assurance to her that she loved her husband, breaking so honestly and fervently from her lips, sounded on the ears of Cecil's mother, she raised her eyes to Heaven, and returned thanks. Her fears were thenceforth at an end for both of them, and the widow must have been in the right when she said that the young married couple seemed happy enough together now. She asked no more confidences from her young guest; she had learnt all that concerned herself and hers. Rachel loved her husband, and Cecil loved Lady Frances, and the grief of the former was a daughter's filial grief for the loss of a father, and time would cure it as it did all things. The elder lady rose from that interview restored to her former cheerfulness, and ready to go through all the necessary preparations for the grand dinner and dance to be given during the ensuing

week; the younger one flew to her own room, afraid lest she had said too much, or that what she had disclosed, however trivial, might find its way back to the ears of Raymond; and overpowered with the burthen of this new delicious secret, which, while it oppressed her with remorse and shame for her past conduct, opened such delicious glimpses of a happy life in the future before her eyes, that she could not but love the lovely fancy, and hug it rapturously to her breast.

But then the thought would flash across her mind, that some day she would have to tell Raymond of the change in her own feelings (for with her happiness came the longing to make him happy also), and she would shrink from the idea, and blush crimson, even if by herself, at the bare fancy of having to do such a thing. Sometimes she argued that she must write it; but oh—not yet—not for a very long time to come! And then she would compose the words, in which to tell her husband that she would be his wife; and suddenly remembering that he had said he would have

it from her mouth alone, and read the truth of the assertion in her eyes—would thrust away the notion of telling it at all, as if she had been called upon to disclose her secret in a public crowd.

At other moments she was still more deeply despondent than before, and would cry to herself in the night that Raymond loved her once—he used to love her; but by her coldness she had killed such feelings in his heart, and that till they died they must be friends, and nothing more. And as she recalled his looks, his words, his smiles upon that first day that they met, and several occasions subsequently, and compared them with the cool and caustic manner in which he now behaved to her, she would really believe that she had been the means of uprooting anything like affection for herself from his breast, and that thenceforth it would be barren. Or he might love another —such things had been; and at the thought, Rachel would turn upon her solitary pillow and moan; whilst she felt that in such an awful contingency she could have strength and courage to rush between

them, and thrust her, that other hateful, hated, ideal woman away from Raymond's clasp, whilst she told him, with tears of contrition, that she loved him—him only—better than all the world beside. But would he hear her then, even if she knelt at his feet or grovelled in the earth before him? Would it not be too late? And then poor Rachel would be even for hurrying into his presence in her nightdress, as she was, and confessing then and there her sin before him, until false shame and pride, and the very vigour itself of the new love she had given birth to, would force her back into her bed, to pass the remainder of the night in tears and dreadful wonderment how this would end. But how much at this period of her life the girl needed the advice and counsel of a man like Raymond, and sometimes even his protection, the incident which follows will substantiate!

It was the afternoon on which the dance and dinner-party were to be given at Craven Court, and Rachel, acting up to the wish which she continued to exhibit

for solitude, had wandered away from the house into the shady shrubberies. Grand old shrubberies they were that surrounded the Court, thick with verdure of many years' growth, and laid out with beautifully kept gravel-paths that were never permitted to become green from moss and damp, or strewn with a carpet of dead leaves. Here and there, at intervals, were little winding paths leading away from the principal walk, and up to unexpected grassy knolls, crowned by benches, backed by trees, and looking over the deer-park and towards the Court itself. These secluded retreats were Rachel's delight; and, although the glories of September were now over, and ruddy October had already commenced its life, she would often steal away, book in hand, to one or other of them, and sit reading by the hour, whilst parties from the house were constantly traversing the flower-gardens and wooded paths without discovering her whereabouts.

On the afternoon in question my heroine left Mrs. Craven busily superintending the arrangement of certain flags and flowers

with which workmen were decorating the dancing-room, her friend, Mrs. Arundel, who could not, consistently with the character she had assumed, allow that she took any interest in such doings (although, in reality, she would have given everything she possessed to be able to join in the proposed festivities), quietly working in the drawing-room, and Cecil and Lady Frances, as usual, lingering beside the uncleared luncheon-table, in order to enjoy their flirtation undisturbed. Raymond had disappeared, she knew not whither, and Mr. Northland's absence was too common an occurrence to excite the least surprise; and so Rachel strolled out with one of Thackeray's 'Miscellanies' in her hand, free to wander where she would, and prepared to spend a quiet afternoon on one of her favourite benches. It was strange that, notwithstanding she had tried to carry out the resolution she had made on first hearing that Cecil Craven took an interest in Lady Frances Morgan, to be a friend to that young lady, she had been totally unsuccessful in the attempt. And yet Rachel

Norreys, when she stooped to conquer, was not generally beaten off the field; and she had really been anxious to accommodate her own ideas to Lady Frances' silly small-talk and girlish ways, and to appear interested in what she had to tell her of her own home and family pursuits; but it was all of no good, so far as drawing the girl towards her in friendship was concerned. Lady Frances would talk if Rachel opened the conversation, but she never sought the other's company nor volunteered her own confidence. Whether Cecil had spoken too much to his lady-love of his mother's young friend, praised too frequently her outward and inward good qualities (as indeed he was fond of doing), is unknown; or whether Mrs. Arundel, with her smooth double tongue, had managed to instil poisonous doubts into the fresh impressionable heart of peachy-faced Lady Frances, also remains a mystery to this day. Perhaps a little of both had worked the harm, which resulted in the young girl's avoidance of Rachel Norreys and tacit refusal of her offered friendship. Otherwise these two, so nearly

of an age, should have been close companions in their pleasures, if not their pains. The loss, however, as it happened, was all on the side of Lady Frances, who was not fitted by nature to hold mental intercourse with Rachel's superior intellect; and so the latter felt, as she took her way alone into the shrubbery paths. "There is not much in her, I am afraid," was her silent thought. "I only hope Cecil may not wait to discover the fact until after marriage, for in that case he will be so much the more disappointed."

It was a beautiful day, although the summer had departed, and far more enjoyable than any of the fiery afternoons of July or August, when to sit upon a garden-bench without a back to it is too much to expect mortal nature to endure. Rachel passed the first mysterious little labyrinth, winding away amongst the taller shrubs, and the second, and turned into the third, close by the bed of rhododendrons. Why, she knew not, until she had reached the grassy hillock and the bench, and finding Mr. Northland there, quietly enjoying his pipe in supposed

security, knew that it had been the perversity of human nature (the most inconvenient thing about us) that had led her steps thitherwards. As soon as he saw her, Mr. Northland started from the iron bench and commenced to apologize. Rachel started backward, and was about to do the same, but laughed in the attempt instead, and then formality between them was at an end. Cousin Gus insisted upon vacating the sanctum, but Rachel would not hear of such a thing, nor would she stay herself unless he went on smoking, so at last they came to a compromise, and she sat herself down upon the other end of the seat and entered into conversation with him.

She was rather glad to have found him there, for although she shunned the society of her friends, it was not on account of her love for her own thoughts. Mr. Northland was totally unknown to her; *he* could say nothing to remind her of the past, or to wound her feelings in the present. Besides which, the interest she had felt in him the first day they met had not been diminished upon a further acquaintance. The Norreyses

had now been more than three weeks at the Court, and during that time, although she had often tried to draw him into conversation, Rachel had never had a *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Northland. She often caught herself thinking about him when he was absent—mentally following his footsteps when he slipped away from the company upstairs to his lonely smoking-room or the sober-saddened shrubbery paths; caught herself wondering what he mused on whilst he slowly paced them; whether it was an ill-spent life or fortune, a dead love or a dead heart. His treatment at the Court, his melancholy, almost brow-beaten appearance, his strange solitary habits, all struck Rachel with so much wonder, that often she could not drive the fanciful pictures which she drew of Mr. Northland's past and present out of her head for hours together. Had she been disposed to be more intimate with her hostess, she might, perhaps, have told her curiosity upon the subject and had it gratified, but Rachel was too shy of Mrs. Craven, and too modest to wish to appear to pry into the affairs of any one in her house.

She had, indeed, once ventured, when the name of Cousin Gus was on the tapis, to remark that he appeared very fond of his own company; and her hostess had answered her very determinately—

"My dear Rachel, he is the *very best* creature in the world; so gentle, so kind, so unselfish, no one could help loving Cousin Gus. You would do so yourself, I am sure, if you only knew him better."

And if the testimony to Mr. Northland's worth could be credited by the tears standing in his cousin's eyes, they were certainly there as witnesses to the truth of her assertion.

But, in the meanwhile, the gentleman in question appeared constrained with Rachel, as, indeed, he was with everybody, and seldom accosted her, except she commenced the conversation. Therefore, to find him alone upon a garden-bench, without any means of escape, was quite a circumstance to be gloried in. Mr. Northland seemed anything but displeased either at the company thus unexpectedly thrust upon him. His soft eyes quite lighted up as

Rachel disposed her light figure upon the seat beside him, and he laid his meerschaum down, and assured her that the pleasure of talking to her so far exceeded that of smoking, that if she had no objection he would choose the former. The pleasure of looking at her also, Mr. Northland might have added, if the direction of his large sleepy brown eyes was to be trusted. "I smoke more for company than anything else," he said; "a pipe is a friend to a solitary man."

"But why do you remain solitary, Mr. Northland?" asked Rachel, smiling. "It is a very bad compliment to us ladies, I think."

"My dear child," he replied, "what on earth should I do amongst a parcel of gay young people like yourselves? You have your husband, and Cecil is engrossed with Lady Frances, and the widow doesn't suit my taste."

Rachel was wicked enough to make merry at this sally on the part of Cousin Gus.

"Are you afraid she will marry you by force, sir?" she asked, laughingly.

"Well, not exactly," he replied; "but I dare say she would try to do so, as I am an unprotected man. You don't remember me, Rachel, do you?"

She coloured at his calling her by her Christian name, and he observed her action.

"My dear child, you are not offended with me, are you? You need not be, for I knew you in long-clothes."

"Did you, really?" said Rachel, interested in his remark. "I cannot remember you at all, Mr. Northland."

"I dare say not; it's the way with the young; but we old fellows don't forget so easily. And yet there *was* a time, Rachel, and not so very long ago, either, when you used to call me 'Uncle Gus.'"

"Used I? All the memory of my childhood seems to have passed away from me," she answered. "My life, in looking backwards, appears to date only from the day I married Raymond Norreys."

"I dare say; I dare say," he replied. "I knew his father also, Rachel, and his grandfather; and the first time I saw him I gave him a rattle. He is a fine young

fellow, by Jove! You should be proud of your husband, my dear.

"I am," she said, softly.

"That's right; that's right," replied Cousin Gus, with an energy very unusual to him. "I am a shy man, my dear; very shy, by Jove! and I'm not much of a hand at saying what I mean, but I do feel very much interested in both Raymond Norreys and yourself;" and Mr. Northland came nearer to Rachel as he spoke.

"You are very kind," she answered warmly. She could not edge herself away from his close proximity, because the bench had arms, and she was at the further extremity of it.

"Very interested, indeed," continued Mr. Northland, and his eyes looked what he said. "I don't know any young people in whom I feel so much so. I wish you would let me be your friend, Rachel;" and with this he slipped his arm about her waist.

With all Rachel's own interest in Mr. Northland, in all her concern for his hermit-like qualities, and her compassion for

his fancied grief or wrongs, she had never been quite able to disabuse her mind of the idea that he was just a *little* queer about the head. Hitherto she had not thought him mad—only strange ; but now, in her alarm at the very particular attentions which he displayed towards herself, she was ready to vote him at once a fit candidate for the honours of Bedlam. She gave a twist to her body, to try and escape from the pressure of his encircling arm, and met the gaze of his usually pensive eyes, now roused into something like the expression of a man.

"Dear Rachel!" he exclaimed, as he felt her endeavours to free herself; "dear, *dear* child, don't be angry with me. I *must*, if it is for the first and last time;" and so saying, he pressed his lips upon her cheek and forehead.

Rachel was now thoroughly alarmed and insulted. With a look of indignation, she disengaged herself from the clasp of Cousin Gus, and without a word, ran panting down the little path which led into the shrubbery, and with heightened colour and fast-beating heart, almost threw herself

into the arms of Raymond Norreys, who was quietly pacing up and down there with Mrs. Arundel. For coming in unwarily soon after his wife's departure from the house, the widow had fallen upon poor Raymond, and borne him off to be her walking-stick in her perambulations, and to indulge him with a little specimen of the innocuous chit-chat with which she was used to entertain Mrs. Craven or Lady Frances, or any one else who was sufficiently unfortunate as to fall into her clutches.

"I really don't know where dear Rachel is, Mr. Norreys, but come with me, and we will find her in no time. Let me think; where is she likely to be? With Major Craven? No, no; that would never do, because Lady Frances Morgan is in the dining-room, and we old soldiers know that three is no company. Depend upon it she is somewhere in the garden, and we'll go and find her out, and give her a good scolding."

It was in vain that poor Raymond insisted that he was in no immediate necessity of finding Mrs. Norreys. The widow

had him by the throat, and he must do her bidding or perish. And so the ill-assorted couple paced the shrubbery paths together.

"How happy dear Rachel seems here," was Mrs. Arundel's first remark, intended to extract a denial from her companion.

"Do you think so?" he replied, falling into the snare. "I have thought she looked pale the last fortnight."

"Ah! well, of course *you* must know best, but I fancied otherwise. She and Major Craven have always been such good friends. I thought they would be so pleased to meet again."

"And yet I had difficulty in persuading Rachel to accept this invitation," remarked Raymond. "She said she didn't want to come."

"No! really? Now *did* dear Rachel say that?" exclaimed Eliza Arundel, her large blue eyes opening wide with her astonishment, feigned or otherwise. "You don't say so? Well, we women are contradictions at our best; and at Gibraltar the two were inseparable. Major Craven is a handsome fellow, is he not?"

"He's well enough," said Raymond, gloomily.

"*Well enough!*" echoed the widow, mimicking him. "Is that all the praise you can find to bestow upon the Adonis of the 3rd Royal Bays? I am afraid poor Craven must depend on Rachel for his share of admiration from the Norreys' family: *well enough*, indeed! I wish your wife could hear you!"

"My wife always says she does not like fair men," said poor Raymond, looking very heated as he passed his hand through his own raven hair, and laid it back from his high and handsome forehead; "she maintains that they are insipid."

"The *naughty* little puss!" exclaimed Mrs. Arundel, laying great emphasis on her adjectives, as if to convey the idea that Rachel was a most abominable liar. "And so she tells you that, does she? *I'll* take my lady to task next time I see her, you may depend upon it. And so she really did not appear to like the notion of coming to Craven Court, the artful little minx."

Raymond Norreys did not admire hear-

ing his wife spoken of in this style, and so he plainly intimated by the frown which gathered on his brow.

"I do not think that Rachel is artful," he replied, curtly; "and there could be no earthly reason for her being so in this case."

Mrs. Arundel changed her tactics immediately.

"Of course not," she said, decidedly; and then added, in a more serious tone, as if they really would not joke any more upon the subject,—"The fact is, Mr. Norreys, I dare say dear Rachel felt that the revival of old associations and the memory of old times would be rather more vivid here than at Brompton—as how should it not be? Here am *I*, you see, from whom she has been inseparable, so sadly altered in my circumstances; and, dear Craven, who was always with us, taken up by that pretty piece of pink and white china indoors — everything changed, in fact. I don't wonder Rachel feels it, poor dear child!"

"Not all changed for the worse for her,

I hope," replied Raymond's voice, cheerily, though he felt anything but cheery. "Her father's death, naturally, was a severe blow to her, but——"

"Oh! I wasn't thinking of her father's death at all," said Mrs. Arundel. "He was a very good sort of man, of course; but still, you see, Mr. Norreys, a father——"

"What were you thinking of, then, Mrs. Arundel?"

The question was positively hovering upon the lips of her companion, whose dark cheek had flushed damask under her last insinuation, when Rachel came flying down the little labyrinth, as I have described, book in hand, and dashed against her husband's breast. Her face crimson—herself almost unable to speak from agitation, she looked far more angry than frightened, and the sudden rencontre added to it, upset her so completely, that at first she could say nothing; and when she managed to articulate, the words which rose to her lips only served to heighten the idea that her emotion

had arisen from some cause of vexation instead of alarm.

"Oh, Raymond!" she exclaimed; "what *are* you two doing here?"

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Arundel, in a tone that was intended to be very jaunty; "that's a pretty question to put to your friends, Miss Rachel. And pray what are *you* doing here, if I'm not impertinent in asking?"

Her husband had also been so taken aback by her sudden appearance, that he had not made up his mind what to say before the widow had concluded her badinage, and so they all three stood and stared at one another.

"I am very foolish," said Rachel, apologetically, and catching her breath as she spoke; "but I was running so fast that you frightened me dreadfully."

"Then why do you run so fast?" inquired her husband; but she was silent.

"I am going home now," she said, presently, as she left them without further parley, and commenced to walk back slowly to the house.

"Why! I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Arundel, as Rachel disappeared, "if the little vixen is not jealous!"

The words shot like a thrill of hope through the breast of Raymond Norreys; and he quite trembled with pleasure as he attempted to laugh them off as a joke, though heartily believing them the while.

"Jealous—she must be so, by Jove!" he thought to himself. "That's not a bad card to play. I'll carry it out this evening. Rachel jealous—by Heavens! how glad I am!"

And he talked and laughed, and made himself so agreeable after he had come to this conclusion, that the widow thought him a more "charming young fellow" than ever. In the meanwhile, Mr. Northland kept close to his retreat, for fear of discovery, and did not even resume the delights of his meerschaum until the sounds of their voices had died away in the surrounding shrubbery, and Rachel retraced her steps to the house.

She was frightened and nervous at the upshot of the little episode which had just

taken place in her existence, and felt conscious that her subsequent conduct had been mistaken both by her husband and Mrs. Arundel; but in either case what could she do about it? To whom was she to go with her tale of Mr. Northland's impertinence?—to Mrs. Craven?—to her husband?—to Elise? Oh, no! Rachel could not tell either of them that this man, almost a stranger, had put his arm about her waist and actually kissed her. To Mrs. Craven, it would be an offence against her guest; with her husband (notwithstanding his want of love for her), it might create a disturbance; and in Mrs. Arundel's possession, the secret would be public property in half an hour. And would she achieve any good by telling it?—that was the question. The man was certainly not right in his intellect—there could be no doubt of that. It was easy for her to keep out of his way for the future; added to which, Raymond and she were going back to Brompton the day after the morrow.

And so, taking all these matters into consideration—although her cheek burned

when she thought of the affront which had been offered her, and she sorely wished she had some trustworthy friend to whom she might confide the secret—Rachel resolved, with regard to Mr. Northland, for the time being at least, to keep her own counsel.

CHAPTER IX.

SEALED HEARTS.

When Rachel entered her room that evening for the purpose of dressing, she found it already occupied by Mrs. Craven's lady's-maid. The black tulle dress, looped up in every direction by clusters of white roses, which she was about to wear, lay spread out upon the bed, and that individual was busily engaged picking out a puffing here, smoothing a refractory bow of ribbon there, and crimping all the leaves of the artificial flowers afresh between her professional fingers. Rachel had brought no maid with her to Craven Court, and had been used, whilst there, to wait upon herself; but her surprise at the novelty of the apparition

before her was soon quenched by the apparition herself, who intimated, in an extremely minced and lady-like tone, "that Mrs. Craven had desired her to ask if she could be of any service to Mrs. Norreys in dressing."

Mrs. Craven might have desired her to ask the question, but she had certainly not desired her to remain, whether required or not, which was, however, what the lady's-maid insisted upon doing, notwithstanding that Rachel affirmed that she always did her own hair, and that the housemaid was perfectly competent to lace her dress.

"Scarcely such a dress as this, ma'am, I think," observed the officious lady's-maid; "at least, I should be sorry to see it trusted to her hands—quite a work of hart, ma'am. I've been admiring it for the last half-hour —made in the very latest fashion—and a sweet fit, I'm sure, from the look of it."

Which, considering it had arrived only that afternoon at the Court, fresh from the hands of Miss Clarke, who had before procured Rachel's measure, was not, to say the least of it, a thing to marvel at.

But since Miss Tagg appeared to wish to do the honours of Miss Clarke's "work of hart," Rachel made no further objection to her remaining for that purpose; and as she deftly proceeded to lace the dress, commencing, in the orthodox Parisian fashion, at the bottom, and having arrived at the top hole, patiently going over the same ground again and again, to be certain that the two sides of the silken bodice were closely connected, using the point of her scissors on her last tour—when the lace was drawn so tight that no mortal fingers could have taken hold of it, Miss Tagg disclosed the reason for her extreme attention to Mrs. Norreys' wants on that particular evening.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," she said, after she had given one or two slight coughs to clear her throat and command the lady's attention, "but have I understood rightly from Mrs. Watson, the housekeeper, that you are in want of a lady's-maid yourself?"

Now the question had been mooted previous to Rachel's leaving the Abbey Lodge.

She had engaged no personal attendant since her dismissal of Caroline Wilson; and on her first arrival in England the maid who did double duty for Mrs. Norreys and her daughter had also attended upon her; but on that disinterested individual giving a slight hint relative to higher wages, Mrs. Norreys had thought it better in every respect, and more redundant to her recognised importance as the wife of her only son, that Rachel should engage a lady's-maid of her own. And therefore, being on the look-out for one, and having mentioned the fact to Mrs. Craven, that lady had commented upon the iniquity of London servants as compared with the innocence of those from the country, and said, at the same time, that she would ask her housekeeper—"a most estimable creature, my dear, whom I have had for years"—to inquire if there were any such women about Weybridge in want of service. And Rachel had answered, "Very well," too greatly occupied with more important things to have much care about the matter.

Now she answered Miss Tagg's present

inquiry with almost as much languor in her tone—"Yes, I am looking out for one. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have a sister, ma'am, a very accomplished young person, who I think would just suit you. She can plait 'air beautiful (she learnt from Truefitt himself), and make dresses for all the world as well as the one I've just laced upon you; and your situation is the very thing she's been looking for. She's younger than I am, ma'am, but not so *very* young, either;"—which was an alternative within the bounds of conjecture, as Miss Tagg's years verged upon forty.

"If she will call on me in town," replied Rachel, carelessly, "I can speak to her. I suppose you know my address."

Over which indifferent reply, Miss Tagg, answering in the affirmative, fell into ecstacies, saying she was certain that her sister Mary Ann and Mrs. Norreys would suit each other exactly, and that she should wait upon her as soon as ever she returned to Brompton.

"Mary Ann is living in Eccleston Square

now, ma'am, and I will write to her by this very night's post. Her present lady, the Honourable Mrs. Waldegrave Walthrop (own sister to Lord Ducies, ma'am), wouldn't part with her for any amount of money; but that end of the town don't seem to suit Mary Ann's system, and she'd rather serve for lower wages than risk her 'ealth. Well, ma'am, I'm sure black and white couldn't be made to look better than your dress do to-night; and the roses are most tasteful. Good evening, ma'am." And with that Miss Tagg curtsied herself out of the room.

But as soon as her own mistress's toilet was completed Miss Tagg found her way to the servants' hall, replete with the news that her sister was about to apply for the situation of lady's-maid to young Mrs. Norreys, and there wasn't no manner of doubt but what she'd get it; for Mary Ann's figger alone was enough to make every one take to her as saw her. But Miss Tagg had better have been more discreet. Several of the servants heard and remembered her assertion, and amongst the rest Martha

Wilson. This girl had been in a very sulky mood for the last week—about that time since her turn for going out on Sunday had come round, and the housekeeper, according to the promise made to Caroline Wilson, had informed her that she was to have no leave thenceforward, except what she spent at Laburnum Cottage with her mother.

Martha was not like other girls. She did not fly, on receipt of this news, open-mouthed to accuse her mother of having brought about her captivity. She knew as well as possible that it was Mrs. Wilson's doing, not Mrs. Watson's, and her heart felt very rebelliously indignant at the check put upon her actions, but she had foreseen something of the sort, and calculated against it. She had gone to her mother's on that afternoon and several subsequent evenings without once mentioning the subject of the housekeeper's prohibition to her; and Caroline Wilson, a little afraid herself of those black eyes—which looked most dangerous when sullenly quiet—had not ventured to be the first to broach the

matter; but her daughter had made up her mind long ago, and only waited a favourable opportunity to put her designs into execution. She had left the barracks because she would not submit to espionage, and she thought as little about leaving her situation for the same reason; only, the next time she took flight her mother should not be the companion of her wanderings. Therefore, as Miss Tagg boasted of Mrs. Norreys' interest in her sister, and her want of a lady's-maid, Martha Wilson had both her ears open, although she took care to keep her mouth shut.

As Rachel, unconscious of the revolution the few words she had uttered before Miss Tagg were creating below, was standing thoughtfully before the pier-glass, surveying the effect of her completed costume, a knock sounded at the door, and Mrs. Craven, also robed in slight mourning (for she had assumed such in compliment to her friend's decease), entered the room. In her hand she held a morocco jewel-case; but her first exclamation was in praise of Rachel's appearance.

"My dear child—forgive me for saying so—but you look uncommonly pretty! I am almost afraid, if I put a touch more to you, that I may spoil the effect that Tagg has produced; but I did come with the intention of asking you to wear these to-night;" and she placed the morocco case, which was rather bulky, in Rachel's hand as she spoke.

One touch of the spring, and the cover flew back, revealing on their dainty bed a magnificent set of carbuncles and diamonds—gems well suited to a dark complexion like that of Rachel. There they lay, looking as if they were never intended to be disturbed—comb, earrings, necklace, brooch, and a pair of bracelets—hundreds of pounds embedded in a quarter of a yard of white satin. Rachel was but a girl after all, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she saw the pretty, womanly toys.

"For *me!*" she exclaimed; "really for me!" She had been used to receive a great many presents, this spoilt young lady, but she had never possessed anything so valuable as this before. She had been

accustomed to have pretty much her own way with her poor fond father; and those of her female friends who liked to be ill-natured were wont to say that it was rather wonderful where all the money came from that supplied the fanciful dresses and ornaments for which Dr. Browne's daughter had been celebrated for always having a plentiful supply. Not out of the good doctor's pay, certainly; for besides these luxuries Rachel always drove a pair of ponies and kept a riding-horse—and not only since her marriage, for from an infant she had invariably been dressed, attended to, and indulged in the same lavish manner. Dr. Browne's friends said he was a fool to do it, but he attached no importance to what any one said, and went on his way rejoicing. Cecil Craven had also been in the habit of making Rachel occasional little offerings, such as brooches and rings, to mark her high-days and holidays as they came round, but nothing like this splendid set of precious stones; no one, with all their worship, had ever so endowed her little ladyship before, and the first sight of

it charmed her. But the next moment she had pushed them gently away, and made use of the same strange words that had fallen from her lips once before when talking with Cecil Craven.

"Oh, no! Mrs. Craven; don't give them to me. I have no right—indeed I have not!"

The eyes of her hostess dilated with amazement.

"*No right!* dear Rachel. What do you mean? Have *I* not a right to do as I will with them? You have every right, dear child; the best of rights, in your dear father's name. It is a long time since I made you a present, Rachel—not, I think, since the last big doll that you coveted in the Baker Street Bazaar; and these trinkets are but playthings for children of a larger growth, after all. Come, let me have the pleasure of putting them on you."

Rachel took the delicate hand, which came so near her face, and kissed it. Her deer-like eyes went upwards to meet the other's glance as she did so, and, encountering it all affection, she said, earnestly—

"Thank you, then, so much. I will take them, since you wish it, for your sake and my *father's* sake; not for myself, who have no claim to such indulgence on your part." But Mrs. Craven folded the drooping figure to her breast, and stopped her speech.

"Hush!—hush!" she answered, softly. "My love, you have the highest claims upon me, though you do not know it." She was alluding, doubtless, to the deep attachment which the father of the girl had borne her, and which had only ended with his life; but whether Rachel knew her claims or not, she no longer made any refusal to receive the gift proffered for her acceptance. She bent forward her graceful head and neck for Mrs. Craven's convenience, whilst the latter hung the delicate ears and throat with the sparkling jewels, fastened them on the glowing breast, and round about the smooth and slender arms.

"We must leave the comb alone for this evening," she said, laughing, as she concluded her task, "for it will not agree with Miss Clarke's white roses. Turn yourself

to the pier-glass, Rachel, and see what you look like."

A little queen, if stateliness of bearing could make her one. Upon her throat and arms, and in her ears, the brilliant combinations of diamonds and carbuncles flashed and glittered till they lighted up the dark skin upon which they lay, and forced it to reflect back their ruby light. And as Rachel contemplated this vision of herself she blushed with pleasure, until her cheeks and eyes rivalled the jewels with which she was adorned.

Mrs. Craven came and stood behind the girl, so that their figures were reflected together in the glass. Seen thus, side by side, and robed in the same manner of costume, the two women did not appear so very unlike one another. Mrs. Craven was the taller, and of the two the fairer skinned, but yet there seemed a semblance, though it was but slight. Doubtless it was derived from the air of command so natural to each, from the good "points" which characterized them both, and the small hands and feet which marked

their breeding; for otherwise, and if one came to analyze the two, they were as different as possible from one another.

"They are positively charming," murmured Rachel, alluding to the effect her ornaments presented in the mirror.

"And so are you, my dear," returned her hostess. "I am so glad you like them; but I must leave you now, and be on duty in the drawing-room." And Mrs. Craven kissed her, and went away to receive her expected guests.

As she left the room Rachel felt uncommonly happy. It was a little thing perhaps (some caustic old critic will observe) about which to make a woman—represented to possess the highest feelings—happy. But few male critics know the ins and outs of a woman's heart. She may have troubles of the deepest kind, and feel them keenly; but it is not in nature to be for ever on the rack, neither could it survive it. A man in trouble seeks relief in play, or wine, or scenes of dissipation; and to women their trinkets, their dress, their dancing—and their flirtations, make up their sum of this

world's vanities. Perhaps they feel all the acuter for indulging in them, as pain strikes sharper and the surgeon's knife cuts keener, when sense returns after the use of chloroform; but who, for that reason, would scorn the relief which temporary loss of suffering alone induces. In the first pleasure of finding herself the possessor of so unexpected and so valuable a gift, it is true that Rachel Norreys, with all her great capabilities for feeling and remembering her pain, forgot everything but that she did possess it. Mr. Northland's rudeness, about which she had so vexed herself, Eliza Arundel's fading friendship, even her husband's coolness towards her, and her growing love for him, were all forgotten for the moment (only for the moment, mind), as Rachel thought how very nice she looked, and how much she should like Raymond to see her. And so she ran out of her bedroom and tapped at his dressing-room door, and, on being answered, opened it, almost without thinking what she was about, and stood upon the threshold.

"Raymond, what do you think of me?"

The words had scarcely escaped her before she remembered where she was, and what an advance it had been on her part to go there, and she was positively covered with blushing confusion as she awaited her husband's reply. Raymond, who had expected to see his dress boots, for which he had just rung, thrust into the room, was almost as confused as herself; but she really did look charming, and as he came forward he could not help telling her so, though, as he said the words, he sighed. To hide her confusion, Rachel commenced a rapid account of how Mrs. Craven had given her the ornaments, and wasn't she very kind? and didn't Raymond admire them very much? and must they not be very valuable? and as she ran on thus, her husband mistook her evident embarrassment for a desire to cover some awkwardness about the jewels themselves.

"*Who* gave them you?" he rejoined, sharply. "*Mrs.* Craven, or Major Craven?"

"Mrs. Craven, Raymond," she replied, with wide-open eyes. "Cecil never gave me anything so valuable as this."

It was not the first time she had called Major Craven by his Christian name before her husband, but he chose to notice it as something out of the common way.

"If *Cecil had*," he replied, with something very like a sneer for Raymond Norreys, "I should have just chucked them all back in his face. Curse his impudence!"

Considering that Major Craven, since his own return, had made no offer even of a present to his wife, the above remark from my hero might have been by some considered irrelevant to the subject in hand; but it was a false move on his part, for Rachel, with a woman's quickness, detected signs in it at once of the feeling he most wished to keep from her knowledge—that he entertained jealousy. For under the influence of Mrs. Arundel's insinuations Raymond Norreys was becoming, little by little, jealous of his young wife. All her pleasure in her ornaments seemed gone then, and Rachel descended to the drawing-room with all the old trouble come back upon her memory like a cloud, and sitting like a thing of Evil on her spirits. She looked

very pretty, and she forced herself to talk and be agreeable, but all her vivacity was feigned. Lady Frances, in clouds of pink tulle and moss rosebuds, and very sanguine of bringing Major Craven to the point that evening, appeared, both at the dinner-table and afterwards, by far the liveliest and most animated woman of the two. The dessert was not lingered over by the juniors amongst the gentlemen on that occasion, and by ten o'clock the music had begun and the dancing-room was pretty well filled. Rachel sat apart at first, declining all offers to dance, and silently watching the feet of Major Craven, Lady Frances, and Raymond Norreys, as they moved through the various figures. The latter appeared in the very best of spirits; his bright face and well-set form seemed to have made a great impression upon the young ladies of the party, who smiled most graciously upon him, and allowed him to do just exactly what he liked with their pencils and programmes.

"He seems happy enough," thought poor Rachel, as she watched a very warm flirtation he appeared to be carrying on with a

faded-looking girl in blue, "and so do Cecil and Lady Frances. My God! why am I the only one left out?" And in her wounded pride and sense of desolation, her short spell of cheerfulness so soon eclipsed again, Rachel Norreys could have wept that evening as she had seldom wept before.

Major Craven and Lady Frances Morgan had a right to appear happy, for it was at this identical party that Cecil obtained the young lady's leave to ask her noble mamma, the Countess of Riversdale, to bestow her pretty plump hand upon him in matrimony. Little has been said relative to more than the mere outside actions of this pair of lovers, and for a very good reason, that nothing more occurred with them than might be plainly seen by those who watched them. There are some people who have no "inside," and Lady Frances (if not Cecil Craven) was of that number. She was affectionate, and modest, and harmless; he was affectionate, and honourable, and easy-going; and beyond this, if more was looked for, the searcher's gain would not repay his trouble. Indeed, it is an undoubted fact,

that the interest that Cecil Craven felt for Rachel Norreys was the deepest that the things of this world had ever awakened in his heart, and that when with her, or thinking of her, he experienced as lively an emotion as he was capable of doing. And yet to see and speak to him or Lady Frances upon ordinary topics, no one would have pronounced either of them deficient in sense or intelligence: it was only when their minds were sounded upon deeper things than this life's frivolities, when one came to speak to them of death, and love, and immortality, that one found that the extent of their capabilities had been fathomed upon the first throwing out of the line. They were not widely different from hundreds of their kind who jostle us at every turn upon the field of life; they played their part at the rate of third and fourth fiddles in the world's great orchestra, and though not thrust prominently forward, still helped to maintain the harmony and well-being of the society they moved in. It would not do for every one to play solos. And although Cecil greatly admired the character of

Rachel Norreys, he sometimes viewed the various phases in it with a kind of awe: occasionally he was almost afraid of her, as he had told her once at Gibraltar; and as a wife, the disposition of Frances Morgan suited his own far better. He was ready (however much he liked her), when he thought of Rachel, to exclaim with Byron—

> "I've seen your stormy seas and stormy women,
> And pity lovers rather more than seamen."

But, however unpleasant they may be at times, it is your stormy women, after all, that can love the best, although they are most dangerous when crossed. Depend upon it, the same energy which, wrongly displayed in one instance, makes our greatest love-poet think it worth while to state his objections to them in his rhyme, will haply bear them through many a tussle in this life, which weaker-minded women would sink under, and keep them faithful to many a love that the falterers amongst their sex would have too much shame, too many scruples, or too great a fear to cling to for better or for worse.

There are scores of Lady Frances Mor-

gans on the earth. Every boarding-school is lined with them ; but it is only here and there, be her faults what they may, that we meet a Rachel Norreys.

However, Lady Frances was the one to engage Major Craven's fancy, or as much of it as was left to be engaged, after having been frittered away in all directions ever since he was sixteen, and he delivered it up to her safe keeping during a promenade, after the fifth waltz which they had danced together on that night. He was not very agitated over his avowal, nor she on her acceptance of the same. He delivered himself of one or two nervous laughs as he told his tale of love, but, nevertheless, seemed pretty certain of what her answer would be ; and Lady Frances blushed a good deal, and said,—" Oh, don't, Major Craven," and " I'm certain you can't mean what you say ;" and then the formality was over, and she agreed that, subject to her mamma's approval, she would become Lady Frances Craven.

" Only, of course, you will write and ask mamma all about it," was her final stipulation ; and Cecil answered, " Of course I

shall, by to-morrow's post,—so that's settled. Are you ready?" And encircling her waist again with his arm, whirled her off once more to make the circuit of the ball-room.

When that dance was over, and he had deposited his newly-made *fiancée* on a seat, Cecil Craven felt confused and heated, and almost depressed, as he rushed into the night air to try and cool himself. Was he already sorry for what he had done? Had he made a mistake, and arrived at the knowledge so soon?

Hardly so; and in his case he never came to look upon the step he took that night as a mistake. But there are moments in all our lives when we wish we were better, and higher, and wiser than we are. Perhaps, even in that first hour of the accepted lover's bliss, Cecil Craven, knowing that Lady Frances was the girl best suited to him as a wife, without a wish for change or a thought of wavering, yet experienced a something like regret that he was not worthier to be mated with something higher and more intellectual than what he felt that he aspired to.

Perhaps he even went so far as mentally to compare his own choice with that dark, thoughtful, "stormy" girl who sat near one of the open windows, pensively gazing out into the night. "But, pshaw!" he said, as he thought of it, "what could I do with a woman like that, if I had her? She'd get sick of me in a week."

In the midst of his cogitations he ran against Mrs. Arundel. Every one was always running against Mrs. Arundel at Craven Court now; but Cecil had scarcely expected to find her at this time walking on the terrace in the dark.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "is that you, Mrs. Arundel? Why are you walking here in the dark? It's damp, too,—there's a heavy dew falling."

"I don't feel it," said the widow, with an air of pensive sadness. "I thought I should like, even though I have no heart to join in such gaiety, to walk up here, where I could see the dancing and hear the music. It is a melancholy pleasure, Craven. It reminds me so of olden times."

"Why, poor old Jack never danced, did

he?" observed Cecil, who was not always very polite in his way of speaking to Mrs. Arundel.

"Oh, dear no! you know he didn't. I was hardly thinking of him in such a scene. Do you remember the dance the Williamses gave the first year we were at Gib, Cecil?"

He remembered the occasion well enough, as being one on which he had made a great fool of himself with regard to her; but he professed to have forgotten it.

"No, upon my word, I don't, Mrs. Arundel."

"Why do you never call me 'Elise' now?" she murmured. "Any other name seems so strange from *your* lips, Cecil."

"When we are in Turkey we must do as the turkeys do," he replied, trying to laugh off her searching question. "It is not the custom in England to call married ladies by their Christian names."

"Ah, well!" she sighed, "perhaps it is best so. But tell me, Craven, that you have not totally forgotten that happy time. You *were* happy, were you not?"

"I always have been so ever since I had the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mrs. Arundel," he replied, laughing.

"Can you laugh when recalling it?" she exclaimed, raising her voice considerably. "Cecil, you are cruel to me. You do it to try my poor wounded heart."

Mrs. Arundel only intended to be highly dramatic; but they were so near the open window of the dancing-room, and the night was so quiet, that her companion was dreadfully afraid that her words should be overheard.

"Good heavens! Elise," he said, "don't talk like that,—some one may hear us. I will see you again soon,—to-morrow or next day, but I must go now,"—and vanished into the house as he spoke.

The widow was in the dark, and alone; but a smile of triumph curled her lip. She had really strolled out for the pleasure of the walk alone; she had little expected to turn up such a trump-card during her ramble.

"I have made him wince," she said to herself, "deny it if he can. Wait till I can

get that little witch, Rachel, and that piece of pink-and-white goodness, Lady Frances, out of the way (and they both go within the week), and I expect I shall do what I choose with their preux-chevalier. What a commotion there will be in the Court when it comes to be known! I imagine his lady-mother will not much fancy having me for a daughter-in-law; but the alternative may be the worse for her. Nous verrons." And so meditating, Mrs. Arundel turned back upon her homeward path.

Cecil, delighted to have rid himself of her company—"the widow was getting so decidedly warm," as he said to himself—rushed into the dancing-room again, and walked straight up to Rachel Norreys, who had been sitting still of her own accord all the evening.

"Mrs. Norreys," he said, with his most finished bow, "I request the honour, etc. etc."

"But you can't have the honour nor the et ceteras, Major Craven," she replied, laughing; "because I have refused every one who has asked me to dance this evening."

"Oh! that's nothing," he exclaimed; "you can say that I am a privileged person, in the same regiment, and all that sort of thing."

"But Captain Crowe has asked me, and Mr. Fisher, and Mr. Weldon" (all of them brother officers of Cecil Craven), "and therefore that would be no excuse at all."

"Then tell the truth," he said, aloud.

"What is that?"

"That I am——" (and the rest of the truth he whispered in her ear).

"*Don't*, Cecil," Rachel said, almost angrily; and the brightest of colours mounted even to her forehead. "You are cruel to me."

The very words which some one else had just sounded in his ears outside the opened window. Raymond Norreys, standing near with his partner, heard them also, but was silent.

"Then you will dance with me, Mrs Norreys," Cecil said, conclusively. From what he drew his evidence was not quite clear, but to Rachel any way it appeared satisfactory.

"Yes, if you really wish it," she said, and rose and joined him.

She waltzed divinely, and she dearly loved the exercise. Cecil Craven was also a good dancer, and they had often and often been partners together when abroad; but his waltzing was clumsy compared to that of Raymond Norreys, whose performance in that way had been pronounced by the belles of the evening to be "perfect." But seeing his wife refuse every offer she received, he had not thought to ask her for a partner. Now, as he watched her, flying round and round in the close embrace of Cecil Craven, he resolved to keep the next waltz open for her. At all events, she would not think a dance too great a boon to give him. With this intention, as soon as the set was over, and Major Craven had placed her, flushed and panting, and looking more charming than he had ever seen her yet, upon a seat, Raymond advanced to Rachel, and asked her if she was engaged for the next waltz.

"Oh, no," she replied, thinking he was vexed at her dancing with Cecil after having refused so many others; "for none. Indeed

I mustn't dance any more. I ought not to have accepted Major Craven, but I am so fond of it, and it was such a temptation."

"I was going to ask you to dance with me," he said, looking rather disappointed.

Now Cecil had asked Rachel several times before in the evening, and Raymond had not been near her once, and she had felt the omission on his part so much, that it had been at the bottom of her so persistently refusing to dance with any one else. For she had watched his steps with the keen eye of one who has a knowledge of the art, and knew that to waltz with him must be more than an ordinary pleasure. And his neglect in this respect having hurt her feelings, she answered him now rather coolly—

"I will dance with you if you wish it, Raymond, but you must make my excuses if I get into a scrape with any one else about it." And thereupon he put down his name upon her unfilled card.

She anticipated waltzing with her husband, although she had appeared so indifferent upon the matter; but when the time came, and the intoxicating measure had

already commenced, and he stood before her, waiting to take her on his arm, looking so distinguished (as she thought), and so graceful, and so different (remember that she loved him) to any one there, Rachel's courage failed.

She had never been in his arms—she who was his wife and bore his name—since the one time he had folded her there before he knew she could not love him. She had never felt the pressure of his hand about her waist, the lingering of his breath upon her cheek, or known the glance of his dark, changeable eyes to be so near her own, since she had parted from him as a child—never since she had been a woman—*never, never* since she had *loved* him!

Raymond Norreys was excited, but not in like measure with herself; he was thinking of the dance. She was thinking of *him*, and him alone, and it was too muc for her.

As she felt the encircling of his arm about her figure, clasped one hand in his, and leant the other on his shoulder, Rachel turned sick and giddy; the room and the

lights went round and round before her failing vision, and she rather gasped than said—

"Raymond, Raymond! for God's sake let me go, or I shall faint!"

He placed her on the sofa from which she had risen to dance with him; he brought her water, whilst officious matrons fanned her into life again, and when the room had ceased whirling, and the music re-possessed some meaning in her ears, and she could remember where she was, the revulsion ended in a burst of tears for which no reason could be extracted from her, but the heat and the unusual exercise of dancing, to which of late she had not been accustomed. Mrs. Craven, soon hurrying to the spot, believed at once that the scene of gaiety had been too much for Rachel in her present state of nervousness, and urged her in a whisper to leave the ball-room. The weary girl was too glad to comply. She hoped that Raymond would follow, and force an explanation from her of her evident emotion, and for that purpose hung about the corridors and staircases till many

hours afterwards, when the dance broke up, and they of the household were retreating to their beds.

But Raymond had wanted no such explanation—had thought he needed none. He had danced no more that night, but wandered out on the dark terraces, and lingered where the corks were flying, and tried to drown his sense of misery in the wine-cup.

"Hang it," he mentally exclaimed—only he used a much stronger and naughtier expression—"she could dance with that pink-and-white fellow there, with tow for hair, and appear to like it; but directly she stood up with me she must needs turn faint, or sham to. I suppose to dance with *me* is too much trouble. But I'll be——" (strong and naughty expression again) "if I'll stand this sort of thing much longer." By which soliloquy it will be seen that love had blinded the judgment of Mr. Raymond Norreys, as it has done that of many a wiser and a better man before him.

CHAPTER X.

MULTUM IN PARVO.

It is often desirable in the course of a romance to crowd a vast amount of incident into a small amount of letter-press; for although a great deal may happen in a few weeks of time, if it does not immediately bear upon the subject in hand its recital in detail is best avoided. Yet links there are, connecting each portion of an acted life with its fellow incidents, which must not be entirely lost sight of, even though the tale be but a fancy of the brain.

Two days after the dance and dinner-party, Raymond Norreys and his wife left Craven Court and returned to the Abbey Lodge. During that time Rachel had

scarcely seen Mr. Northland, and had certainly not spoken to him. Cousin Gus appeared to be quite aware of the impropriety he had been guilty of, and studiously kept out of her way, even when the carriage was at the door to take them back to the railway-station, and farewells were being liberally dispensed and warmly re-echoed. For when the actual moment for parting arrived, Rachel (with that same inconvenient perversity of human nature which has been alluded to before), although she had suffered so much in secret during her visit to the Court, felt sorry to leave it, and clung about the neck of Mrs. Arundel with almost the same degree of fervour with which she used to embrace that lady in the days of yore.

But still, she was really glad to return to the Abbey Lodge. When she arrived at its sombre iron gates, and saw the covered pathway, already beginning to look familiar in her eyes; and the walnut and mulberry trees, which had assumed their autumnal tints since she had seen them last; and, above all, when she caught sight of the bright, glowing face of Christine as she ran

to meet them, bare-headed, regardless of her mother's warnings and the waning day, Rachel felt, for the first time, that the Abbey Lodge was *home* to her, and its inmates were her mother and her sister. And as she rushed into the hall, and received their united welcome, she said so without hesitation.

"Oh! I am so glad to see you both again," was her warm exclamation; "I am so glad to get home!"

The face of old Mrs. Norreys lighted up with a greater gleam of pleasure at the words than had ever been seen there as the result of any intercourse with her daughter-in-law before. She glanced round for Raymond, that her looks might signify her approbation to him also, but he was busy with the luggage, and had not heard his wife's remark. As for the two girls, they were almost as pleased to meet as if they had been really sisters.

"How have you enjoyed your visit, dear?" was naturally Christine's first question; and "Not very much, Christine; I was not half so happy there as I am here,"

was Rachel's ready answer, hailed with increased delight on the part of Mrs. Norreys and her daughter, if the shower of telegraphic glances which passed between them and spoke their mutual pleasure might be accepted as a sign. Yes! these two women loved her well, or were disposed to do so. Rachel felt the truth of this as soon as she found time to think about it; and felt also that notwithstanding all the fidgety rules and regulations, and the monotony of the days as they succeeded each other at the Abbey Lodge, that she could live there, be happy, and love them in return for Raymond's sake and the regard they bore him.

No thought of self entered into her calculations then. Has it not been said that hers was a character which, once loving, would love *well?*

"Rachel, will you come in here for a minute? I want to speak to you."

It was a few days after their return to Brompton, and the voice was that of her husband, and issued from his dressing-room door. Rachel stopped short in her transit to the sitting-room, and complied with his

request. She coloured with conscious pain as she entered the little apartment and saw the sofa where he laid himself down each night in discomfort to sleep, and the general disorder of the room, usual enough in a bachelor's chamber, but which should never be seen in that of a man who has a wife to keep things tidy for him. But Raymond's thoughts did not appear to be running in the same direction as her own, for he never glanced towards the interior of the room, nor seemed by word or look to wish to convey even a tacit reproach for her being so great a stranger there. Since he had returned from Craven Court he had not been out so much in the evenings; but his silence when amongst them at home was so unlike his general behaviour, that it seemed sometimes, not only to Rachel, but to his mother and sister, that his absence would have been a greater relief. He was sitting on the sofa as his wife entered his room, and she went towards him with the evident intention of taking a seat by his side. She often tried now to break the ice between them by some such little graceful act of

advancement, but something always seemed to intervene (untoward accidents, she used to call them) to frustrate her good endeavours. Now, as she approached the sofa, Raymond rose from it, as if to make room for her beside him; but instead of reseating himself, he took a chair, which removed him to the other side of the table. Rachel's eyes sought his with a tender reproach in them, the meaning of which (had he taken the trouble to meet their gaze) he would have found no difficulty in reading; but he never glanced towards her, except in an evasive manner—never, certainly, so as to meet her imploring eyes. He was the first to speak.

"Rachel, would you rather remain here, or go into a house of our own?" He had taken her so much by surprise, that at first she hardly knew what to answer him. "Of course, I don't mean a *house* exactly, because I cannot afford just now to take a whole house and furnish it—it would be folly in me, not knowing our plans for the future — but into furnished apartments. Would you not rather have rooms to your-

self than live here with my mother and sister?"

He thought that alone with Rachel, in a dwelling of their own, he would have, perhaps, a greater chance of winning her affections—of reading her real heart. But she imagined that Mrs. Norreys had intimated to Raymond that they had stayed long enough at the Abbey Lodge, and had expressed a wish for their removal, and so she answered—

"Does your mother wish us to go, Raymond—is that it?"

"My mother?—no, nonsense!" he returned, pettishly; "she would be only too happy to keep us till doomsday, if we would stay;—I was thinking of your comfort, Rachel!"

"Oh, no, thank you, then!" she rejoined, hastily. "I am very comfortable here; I would rather stay, please Raymond—indeed I would!"

The idea of leaving the Abbey Lodge, when they had just begun to love her, scared Rachel; besides, she thought her husband would prefer her choosing to re-

main with his relations, whom he professed himself so much to love and honour.

"Oh! I'm glad to hear you are so comfortable!" he replied, almost sarcastically (ah! Raymond Norreys must have suffered a great deal before such a trait as sarcasm could have developed itself in his generous nature); "I believe your bedroom *is* very comfortable, isn't it?—almost as jolly as this crib, which some might call inconveniently small;—however, I dare say I shall be in a smaller one still before long."

"What do you mean, Raymond?" demanded his wife.

"At sea, my dear," he rejoined, carelessly. "Four such cabins as they give me would go into this room."

"Raymond!" she exclaimed, earnestly, "you are joking—are you not?"

"Joking!" he echoed; "why should you suppose that I am joking, Rachel? I have no intention of idling my whole life away on shore, you know; and, between you and I, from any enjoyment that I've derived from my holiday yet, I think I might just as well be afloat again, and earning a little

money; and I could get appointed to a ship for the asking, for we lieutenants are in a little more request at sea than we are on shore, Miss Rachel!"

His tone was so light and careless, that, as she heard it, she turned cold.

"And *me!*" she gasped. The words really left her lips, but so indistinctly that Raymond did not catch them; but a slight sound which escaped her made him turn his eyes in her direction. He had just commenced to say—

"Well, I suppose we must consider the plan of separate houses quashed then," when he stopped short on catching sight of Rachel's figure. She had risen from the sofa, and was standing, leaning one hand upon the table, her face deadly pale, and her whole form trembling. Her husband tried to continue his sentence, but could not finish it in the same strain that he had commenced. "Well, never mind, Rachel," he said, "we can talk of it another time—or not at all, if you like it better."

Still he lingered, although he had moved towards the door with the evident intention

of leaving the room; there was something in that pallid face and drooping figure which smote him terribly;—perhaps she had something to tell him.

"Rachel," he said, "have you anything you wish to say?"

She shook her head sadly. She could not, for the moment, speak; and men too often mistake such tongue-paralysing nervousness on the part of women (not knowing it themselves) for obstinacy and self-will. Raymond did so.

"If she has anything to say," he thought, "she shall say it; I am not going to coax it from her word by word." And then he added, aloud, "All right, then; there is no need to worry yourself about it," and left her as he spoke. She groped her way into her bedroom, and tried to sit down quietly and think (she could not cry) what life would be to her now without her husband. In days gone by, when she had been a child, and loved him (but with not one-tenth of the deep passion which was growing, day by day, upon her now), she had used to please herself and him with the

idea how, when he went to sea, she would follow the track of his ship, and travel from port to port, so that his wife's face should be the first to greet him when he stepped on shore. And they had often laughed together, and planned with how small a box, how few articles of clothing, and how little money a sailor's wife might journey thus, and how much her husband would have to pay for the luxury of her love to double the pleasure of his brief holidays. And Raymond had said (she seemed to have forgotten these little things of the past until she discovered that she loved him, when they had all come back upon her memory with a rush) that thousands and thousands of pounds could never seem too great a sum for him to give for one sight only of the little face he loved so much—for one kiss of those innocent, fresh lips. And now!—good heavens!—the difference in him and her. This was the greatest grief that Rachel had yet known—too great a one to cry or moan over; all she could do with it was to sit alone in her own room and think, think, think, until

her eyeballs felt hard and burning, and pained her when she closed the lids;—and her head was confused and dizzy, whether she looked back or forwards.

"If you please, mem, there's a young woman for the place of lady's-maid waiting to speak with you."

The voice of the speaker, being that of the individual whose hints for higher wages had been the cause of another maid being required, was high and sharp, and vinegary in the extreme.

"Where is she?" demanded Rachel, unclosing her door. There had been several candidates for the situation since her return home, Miss Tagg's sister amongst the number, but they had all been too much in the style of Miss Tagg herself to please the quick imperious fancy of Rachel Norreys.

"In the dining-room, if you please, ma'am."

"Very well; I shall be down directly;" and in a few seconds, as she had said, she wearily descended.

The face of the girl, who rose upon her entrance, struck Rachel at once as an en-

gaging and honest one. There was character, too, in the scrutinizing glance which she directed towards her would-be mistress, as much as in the return look which Rachel bestowed upon her. It was Martha Wilson, as may be supposed, but how she managed to get there has yet to be told. From the day that she had been ordered to confine her holiday-making to the company of her mother, she had resolved to leave Craven Court; and from the day that she had heard Miss Tagg boast of the interest which the younger Mrs. Norreys took in her sister, and divulge all she knew relative to that lady, Martha had determined that her second attempt at service should be made, if possible, in hers. She was young and inexperienced, and not living in her own house, she would not be so hard as to try and prevent a poor girl from ever enjoying herself. Having come to this resolution, Martha's task was easy. She had only, during the visits she so dutifully paid thenceforward to Laburnum Cottage, to worm out from her mother all that she wished to know concerning Mrs. Raymond

Norreys. This was not difficult, for Caroline Wilson was always ready to handle poor Rachel's name greatly to her disadvantage, and the dislike which her mother bore to her was no secret to Martha. But she was sharp enough to have discovered that her mother's dislikes need not be of necessity her own. She had studiously kept out of Rachel's way whilst she was at the Court (which as Martha was only third housemaid was not by any means a difficult task), for she was particularly anxious that, when she presented herself for service in Brompton, Mrs. Raymond Norreys should not be aware whence she came. This was the easier, since she had in her possession a written testimonial of her capabilities for dressmaking from the milliner with whom she had served her apprenticeship (usually given to each girl who had fulfilled her time with credit), and this, Cecil Craven's recommendation of her to his mother's housekeeper having rendered unnecessary, had been retained by Martha as likely to serve her in an another capacity, and it was so usual a thing for milliners' girls, having

completed their time, to go out as ladies'-maids, that no one would think the occurrence a strange one. The only thing to be effected was the escape from Craven Court, and this was nothing to a London-bred girl like Martha Wilson. She sacrificed a few weeks' wages, that was all; and all was nothing in her eyes, compared with the bliss of being within daily hail of the man she cared for, and liable at any moment of seeing the halo which surrounded him encircle herself. So, one morning, long before it was light, Martha Wilson was up, and on her way to Weybridge station, where she had already despatched her box by the aid of a friendly labourer, and by the time that the servants' breakfast was ready in the hall, she was in the train for London, where she presented herself the same afternoon for the inspection of Mrs. Raymond Norreys.

Her answers to the questions put to her respecting where she had lived, and with whom, were all perfectly satisfactory, as far as could be seen by the lady to whom they were addressed. She had served a seven years' apprenticeship with Miss Kennoway,

of Oxford Street, whose written recommendation she presented for inspection. Since then she had been staying in the country with her parents, and had come up to London again expressly to get a situation as lady's-maid, for which she was quite competent, except in the matter of dressing hair, in which art she was willing to take lessons. But Rachel always dressed her own hair, therefore the girl's ignorance in this respect was no drawback in her eyes. Furthermore, she gave her name as Martha Green (for she was resolved to drop the title to which she had no right, for fear of being discovered in her new situation, and to that end had cunningly contrived to insert the assumed one in her character), and wages were no object compared with a comfortable home. Rachel did not hesitate long. She liked the appearance of Martha's fresh-coloured face, her intelligent expression, and dark animated eyes, and she resolved from the first to take her into her service. However, to please Mrs. Norreys, who was not so charmed with the girl's looks, she left the matter open until she had

visited Miss Kennoway's establishment in person, and learnt what that individual had to say concerning Martha. The only circumstance which leaked out during this interview was that the name Martha had given to Rachel as her own was a feigned one. "Martha Green—Green," said Miss Kennoway, knitting her eyebrows, and trying to collect her mental forces, as Rachel spoke of the girl under that appellation.

"No, ma'am; I have had no girl of that name in my establishment lately. *Mary* Green, perhaps."

"No; Martha Green," persisted Rachel; "at least, I am almost sure of it; perhaps I mistook the writing; it may have been Mary.'"

"But Mary Green is still with me, ma'am; her time is not up till Christmas twelvemonth, and she has no testimonial of efficiency from our house. Now if it had been Martha *Wilson*, a fresh-coloured young woman, with dark hair and eyes, I could understand it. She left me between two and three months ago."

"The girl I speak of certainly answers to

your description," returned Rachel; "but I am sure the surname's Green."

"Then I am afraid, ma'am, some one has imposed upon you with a false certificate." And Miss Kennoway being very busy, and (as Rachel was not a customer) evidently anxious to take her departure, the latter left her in peace. But she did not relate at the Abbey Lodge all that she had learnt. Martha was to return that evening and hear her decision, and Rachel had taken such a fancy to her that she wanted to speak to her alone upon the subject first. So she only repeated what was the truth, that Miss Kennoway had given the girl an excellent character for honesty and good work, and that was all she could be expected to know about her. But when the evening arrived, and with it Martha, Rachel propounded at once to her the question.

"Martha, I am afraid you have given me a false name; how is that? I have been to Miss Kennoway to-day, and she says if that certificate is yours, that your name is Wilson, and not Green. Then Martha grew the colour of a peony, and stammering, said,—

indeed, *indeed* she had had no wish to deceive Mrs. Norreys, but Wilson was not her name, no more than Green. She had no name. She was a love-child; it was hard to say so, but she hoped the lady would think no worse of her for it. That was her reason. She was unhappy at home, and wanted to go out to service, but it was the truth, indeed. The lady did not appear as if she would be hard. She seemed wonderfully moved, in consideration of such a little and a common thing as "no name" claimed amongst the poor. She rose up from her seat, and drew nearer to the confused and shame-stricken girl.

"No name," she murmured softly. "No name! Poor girl; why should I think the worse of you for that, if you yourself are honest? I could only pity you—oh, so very, *very* deeply—for knowing yourself the subject of so dreadful a misfortune."

The name of Wilson conveyed no light to Rachel; why should it? there were thousands of that name all over England. She only disliked the sound because it reminded her of Caroline.

"I am very glad you told me, Martha. I will keep your secret, even from my friends, and would rather call you by the name of Green than that of Wilson; so let me know you so henceforward. No name! no father! Poor unhappy girl!"

She seemed to be speaking more to herself than to the girl before her—almost (if one could but credit it) of herself, the intonation was so pitifully true. Martha Green had recovered her composure by this time, and thanked her mistress.

"I will serve you faithfully, ma'am, indeed I will, if you will try me, for I believe you are the first lady as ever I've met who would not think harm of me from what I've told you."

"I am not the one to do it," replied Rachel, sadly; "the circumstances you mention could only make me feel for you more. I will engage you, Martha, as my servant, and I trust you to serve me well."

The new lady's-maid was installed in office the day after, and for a while, notwithstanding the covert sneers of Mrs. Norreys' abigail, and the openly-expressed

opinions of Mrs. Norreys herself, that the new-comer was rather "dressy," all went well with her. She did her duty, and Rachel demanded nothing more. She had several times asked for leave to "step out for a minute" in the evenings, and her mistress had readily granted it. She was inexperienced in the ways of servants; she saw no harm in a young girl threading the streets of London by night, and she thought it very natural that Martha should occasionally like a little pleasure. But the day came when her mother-in-law said to her—

"My dear Rachel, do you not think that your maid has a great deal of liberty. She appears to me to be out almost every night; do you think it prudent to allow it, so young as she is?"

And Rachel answered, carelessly at first, that Martha was always in when she required her services, and she thought servants were all the better for a little relaxation. But Mrs. Norreys having been reared with different ideas, and carrying them out, found by-and-by that her own abigail was getting profoundly discontented

with the scarcity of leave which she obtained in comparison with the liberty permitted to the new-comer, and brought many and grievous tales against Martha to her mistress, mixed up with her own complaints. Consequently, the next thing which Rachel heard was, that her maid not only had letters brought to her by private messengers, but that she was often out of the house when she had given her lawful mistress no intimation of the fact; and that she had been seen, on more occasions than one, walking and talking with a man outside the Abbey Lodge, and sometimes late at night.

"And I am sorry to trouble you again, my dear Rachel," Mrs. Norreys wound up with, "but really it is a circumstance that you must speak to Martha about. Such a thing has never been allowed in the Lodge before, and we shall have all the other servants discontented, added to which, my dear, it is not safe, especially in a place like London. We know very little about the girl, and the next thing will be, that she will bring the man into the house. Good gracious, at this rate, the whole place

may be robbed before we know where we are!

And Rachel, although she felt the task set her to be a great trouble and nuisance, had no alternative but to speak to Martha about what she had heard on the very first opportunity that she found for doing so. Her accusation, notwithstanding its truth, took the girl wonderfully aback. She had not been aware that her assignations with Mr. Tom White outside the Abbey Lodge gates had been either seen or noticed. She had just begun to settle down comfortably in her place, and to feel attached to her young mistress, and now the awful words that Rachel thought it her duty to use—"I could not allow such a thing in the house, Martha; if you persist in such an acquaintance I am afraid we shall have to part," struck her like a knell.

For this she had been turned out of the barracks, thrust from beneath the roof of her legal and natural protectors; for this she had thrown up her situation at Craven Court, and left her mother without a line to trace her whereabouts; for this she sup-

posed she should have to leave this place also, where she was so comfortable, and thought it probable she should remain so long. Would it not be the same wherever she went? would not her fatal attachment to this great Unknown pursue her, and be condemned by all who became aware of its existence. The idea was too much for poor Martha. She had been impudent to her mother's husband and defiant to her mother herself; but Rachel's kindness, and the sense of desolation which was creeping over her, broke her down entirely. Her head drooped lower and lower as her mistress expressed her disapprobation of her conduct, and before she had concluded, Martha's face was in her hands, and she had sunk down on the ground against a chair, sobbing with all her might.

Her distress touched Rachel; she had never seen anything like tears upon her servant's face before, and Martha's grief, like her nature, was very violent and stormy. Therefore she drew near the girl—and laid her own small hand upon the other's palm, and spoke kind words, trying to soothe the

tempest of her grief. Little by little, she drew from her the whole story of her love; of how she had met the man who called himself Tom White, of the words he had used towards her, the promises he had made, and the presents he had given. Rachel was young in years, but not in heart; her quick comprehension told her in a moment with how much danger such an intimacy as her maid described must be fraught to a girl in her station of life if—as Martha affirmed—her lover was a gentleman. She tried to place the circumstances and probability of their issue in a plain, every-day light before the eyes of the uneducated woman—attempted to make her answer to herself the question, to what end a gentleman could pay attention to a milliner's apprentice; and to make her comprehend, by her own reasoning rather than by what her mistress said to her, that if he really loved her—as he said he did—he would speak his mind out like an honest man, or leave her to herself and safety. She drew a mental picture of Martha in those splendid rooms of his that

she described as having seen, and placing it before her, without a single dash of spurious colouring to make it brighter, bade her ask herself what she could do there? how she would look and act, if even she were asked to go, which yet was more than doubtful? There was but one way in which a gentleman would take her to his home—and when Rachel spoke gently on this subject, not to wound the other's coarser feelings—her own voice would falter and become low, and Martha's cheeks, which were honest, she thanked Heaven, yet, would redden as much as any lady's in the land when Shame is talked of.

These conversations did not all happen in one day; nor was it even in one confidential hour that Rachel drew from Martha the story of her love. But little by little it oozed out from the woman's over-laden breast, at first in her own defence, then as a relief—and lastly, with an agonized cry for help, as the probable issue of her attachment was set before her in its proper light. This is the part of my story, which if detailed, and canvassed thoroughly, might

almost fill another volume, but which, though leading to a circumstance of importance, and therefore necessary to be touched upon, is of itself so apart from the fortunes of my hero and heroine that to do more than skim it lightly would be to exceed the duty of their biographer. But having learned the history of her lady's-maid, Rachel's next concern was to lead Martha to act in the future as might be best for herself. She could not ask her to give up at once this man's acquaintance (no true woman would have done it, being asked without a better proof of his unworthiness than mere assurance), but her object was thenceforward to try and find out, and make the girl herself attempt the same, what was his mind towards her. And busied with such thoughts and full of trouble for herself, Rachel found the autumn drag on drearily. Sometimes she felt it almost too heavy for endurance, and nightly she cried to Heaven to send a way or means by which her path might be made straight before her.

At this time she was greatly given to

sitting writing by herself; sometimes little histories of her own heart to give to Raymond, by which it might be made quite clear to him why she had not cherished the same love to greet him with which she had promised so to keep when they had parted; sometimes long letters to ask him to be merciful, to tell him that she bore a heavy secret at her heart, which was wearing her life away—and clouding all her happiness—and that she longed for his sympathy in her discomfort and his guidance, even though she must not tell it him; sometimes she poured out passionate effusions that she loved him, *loved* him—and should die unless he let her tell him so, and echoed back the assurance to her fainting heart. And these last, she would generally write in the dusk, or late at night, and, reading the next morning, would blush over them and cry, as she felt that no written words could ever say how much she cared for him; and if they could, that she should never have the courage to send them on their mission. One night she even went so far as to lay a tiny note upon his desk when she retired to rest

—only a few paltry words—to say that she was sorry—oh! so sorry, Raymond, for the past, and that—that—she was his affectionate wife,

RACHEL NORREYS.

But taken with a sudden fright lest he should never read them, or reading, feel indifferent, or angry, crept in again softly in her nightgown, and abstracted the note before he could return to claim it, and took it back with her to bed, and laying it under her pillow, wept herself to sleep.

How foolish! some will exclaim perhaps—how weak! how worse than childish! only one word required to make them both happy, and such a fuss made about saying it.

Yes; only one word, and a very common one; but still a word, fair lady, which under the same circumstances you might have found it very difficult even for your courageous self to utter; for this barrier had been raised between the husband and the wife—not by *her*, but *him*—it was Raymond who had said he would not claim her

ever, and had left the proud, sensitive heart henceforward to do its own wooing.

And Rachel's pride had rebelled at his late treatment of her, and it had made the task before her still more difficult than it had been before; but with all her anxiety and suspense, she never thought of making a confidant in this, except, in Heaven's good time, the only one who had the right to know it. Else, had she been so disposed, Christine would have been very happy to cry over her troubles with her, and suggest impossible remedies; but poor Christine had her own little cloud looming in the distance. Her spirits had not been so bright since Rachel's return to Craven Court, and that the latter soon discovered; but her sister-in-law (beyond allowing that something connected with Mr. Alexander Macpherson had certainly vexed her) would not plead guilty to the charge. The fact is, she had no tangible source of trouble; it was only dawning upon her, that notwithstanding her prospects in life were supposed to be settled, there was an unsatisfied want ever making itself

known when she thought of the future before her. A fearful "only," though, for a woman to combat with; and sweet, loving Christine Norreys deserved a better fate than to be left to grapple with it alone. But at present it was too much a shadow and an unreality to be spoken of, except to her own heart.

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN SCORNED.

Craven Court was unusually empty. Mr. Northland had gone into Berkshire on a visit to some friends; and Lady Frances Morgan had returned to the protection of her mother, the Countess of Riversdale. The fact that Major Craven had made her daughter an offer having been duly communicated to that lady, and most graciously responded to on a sheet of scented and gilt-edged paper, with all the arms of all the Riversdales emblazoned in every colour of the rainbow thereon, Cecil's heart was, of course, most properly set at rest upon the matter, and his mother's thrown into a perfect palpitation of delight at the

successful issue of her matrimonial scheme for the advancement in life of her son. But the Countess thought it advisable, under her altered circumstances, that Lady Frances should return to the maternal wing at once, where she would be happy also to shelter Major Craven if he would follow his fiancée, as soon as was agreeable to himself, and make a short stay at Egham Priory; for, although the noble Countess was very well pleased to marry her daughter to a commoner, she did not derive the same satisfaction in the prospect of keeping the said commoner at her own expense for a period of more than a few weeks. Cecil accepted the limited invitation more for appearance sake than anything else, and intended starting for Egham Priory in the course of a few days.

In the meanwhile, he and his mother were left to the enjoyment of each other's company. In a few lines, Cecil had made known to Rachel Norreys the issue of his proposal to Lady Frances Morgan, begging her, at the same time, to keep the matter a secret for the present, which, whilst heartily

congratulating him on his success, she had readily promised to do; and this embargo Cecil also laid upon his mother. Mrs. Craven, in her pleasure and excitement at the news, was all eagerness to transmit it to every one she came across; but on this point her son was resolute. He had the scruples of a man in such things, and did not relish his private affairs being made the subject of public comment, even before they could be said to be finally settled.

"When the wedding-day is fixed, there will be plenty of time for gossiping," he said, in answer to his mother's arguments in favour of placing the announcement amongst the fashionable on-dits of the 'Morning Post.'

"Not even to Mrs. Arundel, Cecil?" she complained; "may I not tell such an old friend of yours as that? It will give her such pleasure to hear it."

Cecil was doubtful of the exact amount of pleasure that the widow would derive from the intelligence, but would allow of no exception to the strictness of his orders, even in her favour.

"Certainly not," was his undisguised reply. "I would rather any one knew it but that 'sad rattle,' as she calls herself, Eliza Arundel."

"Well, Cecil, I must say that I think you behave very badly to the widow of your old friend," rejoined Mrs. Craven, reproachfully. "I am sure Mrs. Arundel is a most charming and amiable person, always ready to do a kindness, or to make herself useful; and your constant refusals to go and see her oblige me at times to feel very awkward. I declare, you have not been once in the cottage since she settled there! Do call upon her, my dear, before you go to Egham Priory."

"What will be the good of it?" he argued; "she is here every day; I see her often enough, Heaven knows."

"Politeness requires it, my dear Cecil. It is only for the form of the thing."

"If it's only for the form of the thing I can leave a card there, or send it by post."

"My dear!" exclaimed his mother, "you are really very ungrateful. Have you for-

gotten all the kindness she has shown you in times gone by?"

"Well, what on earth do you want me to do then?" he said at last, tired of arguing the point.

"Only go and call upon her, dear, and say you are sorry you have not been before, and anything else that is polite."

And so, taking a great deal of credit to himself for his filial obedience, Cecil Craven announced his intention the next morning of putting his mother's wishes into execution; and as after luncheon (at which meal, for a wonder, the widow had not been present), he was about to stroll over to Laburnum Cottage, his mother met him in the hall, with a large bouquet of hothouse flowers.

"Take these to dear Mrs. Arundel, with my love," she said; "and tell her I hope we shall see her at dinner this evening."

Cecil looked at the flowers in dismay—

"Why couldn't you have sent them over with a note?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you lazy boy, you fine gentleman!" was his mother's rejoinder. "Do you really mean to say that you would be ashamed to

be caught carrying a bouquet of flowers for a lady ?"

"No, not *ashamed*," he answered; "but —well, never mind, give them to me, mother, though I shall not deliver your message, because she's sure to come to dinner without it."

Mrs. Craven laughed, and called him more names, and then he stepped into the Court grounds, flowers in hand, and took his way to Laburnum Cottage.

The widow had not been without hope that she might see him that afternoon, although she could hardly be said to have expected him. But this was the first time that Major Craven had visited the Court on leave since Lady Frances had returned to Egham Priory, and Eliza Arundel had not forgotten the little interview which had taken place between them on the terrace the night of the dancing-party, and had taken to lingering in her own drawing-room until the first dinner-bell rang at Craven Court, on the chance of Cecil redeeming the promise he had made that evening that she should see him soon.

She was heartily glad to think that, for some time at least, her intercourse with him during his visits home would be uninterrupted; for it was unlikely that either Rachel or Lady Frances would return to the Court at any rate before Christmas, and judging from the specimen of her power to move him that Cecil had given her when she accosted him on the terrace, what might she not do, if she played her cards well in the course of two whole months almost spent in his company. But not under his mother's roof; what she effected must be within the limits of her own home.

The departure of Martha from the Court had excited no small surprise both there and at the Cottage, for she had now left her place for some weeks. Caroline Wilson had not gone distracted, it was not in her nature to do so; but on making the natural inquiries amongst Mrs. Craven's servants, that a mother under such circumstances would do, and receiving some rather illiberal remarks from the housekeeper on her daughter's conduct, she had abused and insulted that respectable personage to such a degree,

that Mrs. Watson had forgotten all about her respectability, and showed that she possessed a "rough side to her tongue" as well as Mrs. Wilson, and the two did not again part until they had established between them an everlasting and bitter hatred. Then Caroline had gone to the Aldershot Barracks, looking everywhere for her daughter, and subsequently to Miss Kennoway's, in Oxford Street, who deposed to having been asked by a lady for a character for one of her apprentices lately, but it wasn't Martha Wilson.

"And if it had been, I should have been none the better able to inform you where she is," concluded Miss Kennoway, "for the young lady was in here and out again in a quarter of an hour, and left neither name nor address."

And so poor Mrs. Wilson had returned home to Mrs. Arundel none the wiser for her search; and although she gave it as her steadfast opinion that "Martha would turn up, married or single, before long, and 'twasn't a bit of manner of use fretting after her, or looking for her," she *did* fret

about her daughter's flight, and most visibly so, and became more sour and vindictive-looking than she had ever done before. And robbed by this means of one of her chief sources of amusement (for Caroline Wilson was no longer so ready to talk gossip, or rake up old tales of scandal as she had been), Mrs. Arundel was more than ordinarily pleased on the afternoon alluded to, to hear the wicket-gate of her little enclosure slam, and, looking up, to see Cecil Craven actually entering alone, and of his own accord, and bearing a large bunch of flowers in his hand. It looked well now, it really did; and the widow settled herself with a becoming expression of langour and wearied expectation on the reclining couch which filled up one-half of the tiny room, so that when Cecil entered, and took a chair near her, it was pretty well filled altogether. The widow was most becomingly attired for conquest—indeed, with the exception of the cap, no costume could have suited her better than her weeds, since the intense black contrasted well with her fair skin and hair, and took off from the growing *embonpoint* of her

figure. And this afternoon, either by accident or design, she had no cap on at all; but her flaxen ringlets were disposed about her face as in days of yore, and caught up negligently into a silken net behind. Cecil really thought, when he first turned his eyes upon the widow, that he had not seen her look so well for ages as she did upon that glowing afternoon in the latter end of October.

"My dear Craven," she ejaculated, as he greeted her, "what charming flowers, and what a pleasure and surprise to see you here. It is the first time (is it not?) that you have honoured my tiny domains."

Upon this searching address, Major Craven found himself positively stammering, as he gave the flowers and his mother's message (which slipped out of his mouth in his confusion, although he had really intended not to deliver it), and said he believed Mrs. Arundel was right, but that his frequent absence from home, and his onerous duties whilst there, as only son, etc., etc., must plead his excuse for the apparent neglect.

"Ah, now, hold your tongue, you naughty

boy!" exclaimed the widow, playfully, as she shook her curls at him, "and don't make any more false excuses, because it's no use; we know all about it. When the Court is full of young ladies there is no time to be dancing attendance upon old ones, and that's the truth, isn't it?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Arundel, you do me great injustice," ruefully said poor Cecil, who was a bad hand at fighting his own battles when brought face to face with a woman. "If I had not had the pleasure of seeing you so often, I should certainly have found my way over here, if only to ask the reason why, and that you ought to know, if you do not."

"Ah, well!" sighed the lady, "you are all alike, the whole lot of you! And now that you have come, tell me some news. Have you heard from your lady-love since her departure?"

"What lady-love?" he inquired, evasively.

"Now, don't pretend not to understand me, when you know as well as I do—or have you so many, Craven, that you are doubtful which I allude to?"

"I am really quite in the dark," he replied.

"Well, then, I must enlighten you, I suppose. I meant Lady Frances when I first spoke, but perhaps you were thinking of Rachel Norreys. Ah, Craven, you're a sad, naughty boy!—Helas!" and the widow heaved a sigh that threatened to burst the seams of her bombasined bosom.

If Cecil Craven did not like to hear the name of Lady Frances Morgan connected with his own, still less did it please him to think of Rachel Norreys being spoken of in the same style, and therefore he answered gravely—

"A jest is a jest, Mrs. Arundel; but you forget that Rachel Norreys is a married lady. That circumstance should preserve her sacred even from a jest."

But here the remembrance flashed into his mind of how much that argument had weighed with himself when the reputation of the woman before him had trembled in the balance. He felt ashamed and vexed that he should have been betrayed into such an expression of feeling in her presence.

Eliza Arundel guessed what he was thinking of, and took advantage of the circumstance.

"Do you really think so, Cecil?" she asked, in a pathetically plaintive voice; "not *always*, I am afraid." He stirred uneasily on his seat, and was silent. "I know it *should* be so," she continued, in a low and virtuous tone; "but how few of your sex act up to such a sentiment! And then, when they have injured, perhaps by their thoughtless attention, the character of a woman they professed to love, they leave her to bear alone the brunt of the world's opinion, and the blame. For she is the one who is always blamed the most, even though her heart should have been so concerned in the matter that years of after-neglect fail to wipe out the memory of past happiness from her mind, nor the love in which it resulted from her soul." And two tears, round and big, and majestic in their course, came rolling slowly down the nose of Mrs. Arundel, and hung there so inconveniently long, that they tickled her, and she was obliged, for comfort's sake, to dash them

and their effect away together with her hand.

"Now, is it not so, Cecil?" she demanded presently of her victim.

"I know it is sometimes, Mrs. Arundel," he replied.

"Why *Mrs. Arundel?*" said the widow, with a mixture of injury and expostulation. "You called me Elise the other night, Cecil (that night the thought of which has haunted me ever since), why cannot you continue it? Is it *too much* to ask, after all that has passed between us?"

It was a great deal too much, and Cecil felt it to be so; but with his habitual cowardice for doing what he knew was right, when it resulted in present inconvenience to himself, he yielded to her desire. Besides which, neither Rachel nor Lady Frances were within hearing, and Cecil was but a man.

"Of course not, Elise—don't mention such a thing," he urged. "I have dropped the habit for the sake of prudence, fearing it might attract notice,—for *your* sake, indeed, rather than my own. But I will

call you that, or anything, so that you will be prudent also, and not wound us both unnecessarily by alluding to what is past. We can gain no good by it, Elise; it is best forgotten. I was young then, and very wrong, and have to ask your pardon for leading you, perhaps, into much that was folly"—(if Major Craven had substituted "being led" for "leading," it would have been more to the purpose)—"but I know you have forgiven me long ago, for you have often told me so, and all we have to do now is to forget it, and be happy."

"Easier said than done," said the lady, shaking her head mournfully.

"Nay, Elise," he responded, "you must not say that, even if you feel it. It does not go well with this sort of thing;" and he touched her crape-covered dress as he spoke. She twitched it from his grasp impatiently.

"And who do you imagine I mourn for," she exclaimed, angrily, "if not for you, Cecil? What do you think this black dress reminds me of, if not of your broken promises and vows of love? Oh, Cecil, is it

possible that you have forgotten all we once talked of and planned together? Has the remembrance of those palmy blissful days altogether faded from your heart? Does no recollection ever flash over it of the time when you used to say that to call me *yours*—to feel my smiles, my duty, and my love—your lawful due—you would barter all your prospects for this life, and even for the life to come?"

Some such blasphemous and foolhardy sentiments might have escaped poor Cecil's lips, when, in his hot, unthinking boyhood, he had first looked upon the meretricious charms of Eliza Arundel, and he entertained no doubt but that they had, but they were none the less calculated to cover him with shame by being recalled to him now, and he said so openly.

"I dare say I did, Elise (I have no doubt I did, since you say so), but those are amongst the things that are best forgotten. We cannot renew those days; let us bury them with even the recollection of the follies we then uttered. I am grieved to find that you have not already done so.

You must think less of me, I am afraid, than I hoped you did."

"Less of *you*, Cecil, when I think of them! Why should I? It is at such times only that you appear to me as you used to do. Why is it impossible those days should be renewed?"

He turned quickly round—he had been gazing out of the window—and faced her suddenly. "Elise, you would not have them so, even if you could."

"Why not?" she cried. "Do you think that *I* must be changed because you are so; that I am rejoiced to see the link between us broken, because you have long striven to escape from the old fetters? Cecil, you once *swore*, if ever I was free again, that you would be my husband. Do you ever think of that?"

He felt almost frightened at the woman's vehemence, and scarce knew how to answer her. But at last he said, somewhat as he had done before, "You do not mean to say, Elise, that you would be so bound again, even if you could. You do not mean to tell me that I am regarded by you with the

same feelings that you held towards me six or seven years ago. It is impossible."

"It is not impossible," she exclaimed, rising from her recumbent position, and coming towards him. "Cecil, it would have been impossible for me to have forgotten such as you; and you—I scarcely think, you have forgotten, either, though you try to make me believe so. I have spent a weary life for your sake, Cecil; borne a great deal from you in silence, and without reproach; but if you will fulfil your promise now (it *was* a promise, and a sacred one), you will find me ready to forgive and cancel all the past, in consideration of the present. Think of those vanished years, dear Cecil; of my love for you, and yours for me, and say we shall be happy from this time forward."

She looked into his eyes as she spoke, and tried to bring back into her own some of the old expression which used to lurk there when she was younger, and fancied that she loved (however base the metal of her liking) the man who was before her.

But she utterly failed. Love of gain, of

triumph, of self, were there, and many other loves as ugly as themselves, but no true unselfish passion calculated to lure back the heart which had forsaken her.

And this was altogether too much for Cecil Craven. He was a moral coward, truly; but he could not sit still and be offered marriage by a woman whose very name he had learnt to abhor, and whom he had given to understand years ago was to consider all things between them at an end. That there had been passages of love between them, and that he had made many foolish vows of never-dying constancy, he knew, and for that reason had been leniently disposed towards the widow, and anxious to avoid wounding her feelings; but the time was past for even this. He was no longer free to be spoken to in such a strain, and Mrs. Arundel must know it for the future. And so he rose, and standing off a little way from her, said, though not without a degree of hesitation—

"Elise, this is folly; it must end. That we were lovers once, I do not wish to argue; but if I professed to care for you still, even

in the slightest degree" (he thought that, whilst about it, he would be brave), "I should profess what is not true. The past is past. Let it be forgotten by us both; or if that is impossible, at least buried in silence. Do not let us ever allude to the subject again; and to tell you the truth, one reason why I have kept aloof from you until to-day has been occasioned by the fears that we might be tempted so to do. But it can be productive of no good, and may do infinite harm (to your friendship, for instance, with my mother). So for all our sakes it will be better never spoken of. For my own part, I must refuse to do so again." And then he stood, looking foolish, as a man must do under such circumstances, waiting for the woman's answer. It came at last, in a perfect burst of fury. She knew her game was lost, and so no longer feared to run the risk of allowing him see her hand; but the storm came down on his devoted head like hailstones and coals of fire.

"*You* refuse, indeed! *You* refuse, Major Craven, to speak again upon this subject! What if *I* refuse to hold my tongue upon

it? You brought a scandal upon my good name; you were the cause of quarrels between my husband and myself. You have promised, again and again, if the time ever came for it, that you would make me your wife. Suppose I refuse to keep silence upon this. Suppose I choose to tell it all to your mother and your circle of admiring friends. What then, Major Craven; what then?"

"What then?" he answered, contemptuously. "Why they might call me a fool, Mrs. Arundel, and justly, for having been so easily taken in; but I am afraid they would bestow a harsher name than fool upon yourself, for leading a boy of twenty so much the wrong way; and not the first boy, either, that had fallen in your hands; remember that. Had it been so, I might mislead myself with the false notion that what you say is true, that your heart still is mine, and that, in consequence, you hold some claim upon me. But you know that it is false. You know that I was but one out of many such; and that the name of Arundel was known throughout the regiment I belong to as another word for *man-*

trap and *deceiver*. You almost make me blush to have to speak so to a woman, but it is more your shame than mine that you have forced the truth from me."

And then he held his head down, and drooped his eyes so as not to meet her own, as an honest man should do when necessity compels him to lower the woman he has once professed to love. And she listened to his speech throughout in silence. She saw that she was impotent in his hands; and when he had concluded, her rage almost prevented her utterance. Her pale face had turned an ashy grey; her lips were livid, and she could hardly find her tongue, but when she did, her next words were—

"But your reputation is capable of being soiled, Major Craven, without the aid of *my* name being dragged through the dirt. Suppose I choose that course of action?"

"I defy you to do it," he replied. "I defy you to hurt me, my reputation, or my happiness. On the first you have no longer any power; the second is far above *your* reach, unless you soil your own (and you

are too much woman in one sense, and not enough woman in another, to do so much for me); and as for the third, it is secure, thank Heaven, and will soon be securer still."

She understood what he meant, and her lips set themselves together and trembled.

"You mean," she said, slowly, "that you are engaged to be married to Lady Frances Morgan."

He was too desirous to triumph over her to be prudent; too satisfied with his own success to be modest; too much engrossed in his wish entirely to nonplus and undeceive Mrs. Arundel to remember his wish that she should not know of his engagement, and so he said—

"I *am*, and shall be married to her very shortly. Perhaps, after this announcement, you will have the kindness to leave me alone." He had taken up his hat, then, and seemed about to go, but pausing on the threshold, apparently had not the heart to leave the woman, shamed through his own words, without a single farewell. And so he said, rather rapidly, "I hope what has

passed between us this afternoon will make no difference in your intercourse with my mother, Mrs. Arundel. My lips, you may rest assured, will never open on the subject, so the issue of our conversation rests now entirely with yourself. Good morning." And bowing to her, he curtly took his leave, whilst she remained standing where he had left her, mute from astonishment at his coldness, and disgust at her baffled design.

What she did during the rest of that day of disappointment is not known, but it is certain that she never appeared at the Court dinner-table, and on Cecil being asked the reason by his mother, he briefly answered, that he was not in the lady's confidence; and that if Mrs. Craven was very anxious to learn, she had better send to Laburnum Cottage and inquire. But Mrs. Craven's anxiety did not appear to extend to this degree, and the mother and son passed the evening alone together.

On the next day Major Craven took his departure for Egham Priory.

There is a well-known passage in Con-

greve's "Mourning Bride," which runs thus:—

> "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,
> Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned."

And when I first began to write the history of Mrs. Arundel, I thought it would form an appropriate motto for the passions which her life displayed.

But the more such a character as hers is analysed, the less can it be justly connected with anything, however wrong, that has in it the elements of power, and grandeur, and nobility. "Love" (real love) "to Hatred turned," and bearing as its fruit Fury and Rage, is a lamentable exhibition of a soul-degrading passion, but with all its errors it has stamped upon it the word "great."

"A woman scorned" where she has reason (on account of her own constancy) to look for love, is a situation which human nature cannot contemplate without a shuddering horror, nor endure without higher aid than is to be found within the limits of its own strength. What wonder, then, that a devouring mania turned upon itself, wronged without reason, and cruelly shamed before

the world, should generate all evil, injury, and revenge, even to bloodshed, and a hurrying of its victim into the arms of an eternal retribution.

But Mrs. Arundel's feeling for Cecil Craven was not love, and that constitutes all the difference. Had she really loved, she would have wreaked her vengeance, or parted from him, ages before, and not carried a smiling face above her fancied wrongs, whenever it suited her convenience so to do. Congreve's "woman scorned" would have spoken out when first the scorn was hers; she would have died beneath the silence and maintained propriety of heaped-up years. Her *heart* it was that had been touched, and lighted up her furious rage; but it was the *vanity* only of Eliza Arundel that had suffered; consequently the *little* feeling led her on to a little and inglorious revenge. No! I abjure that motto for the widow Arundel; henceforward it must stand for some woman with a larger mind, a larger affection, more love for the man who has wronged her, and less for herself. After Major Craven had

left her, with truths upon his tongue which she should have almost died with shame to listen to, Eliza Arundel felt no pity for him or for herself;—no admiration kindling in her breast for his outspokenness whispered that he was right and she was wrong;—no wish broke from the heart she said still loved him, that he might be happy —whatever was the fate in store for her!

No! there was no room in the widow's breast for any thoughts like these—for any pity, love, or self-contrition; her whole mind, from the date of his departure, was filled but with one idea—the best method for carrying out a petty and malignant revenge against him for his rejection of her advances. "He shall regret it; he shall be sorry; I will make Major Craven rue this day!" were the sentences which, ringing their changes but with little variation, passed rapidly through her brain, as she pondered on the interview which had just taken place between them. She had thought of this—anticipated it—even prepared for it. She had seen it looming in the distance for her, when she was at Gibraltar;

had watched it drawing near and nearer almost daily, ever since she had set her foot in England. And now it had arrived, she was more than ready to follow it up with her revenge—a revenge to gratify which she would have sacrificed her own father and mother—if she had possessed any—her own children, anybody, or anything but herself; and, as far as that went, she felt that in the eyes of Cecil Craven she had sacrificed herself already.

For that evening, and many evenings afterwards, she sat closely to her own room, writing and re-writing long letters, and then destroying them, only to be transcribed afresh upon the following day; holding lengthy private conferences the while with Caroline Wilson, whom she admitted to familiar conversation with herself, more as if she was a friend than a servant; and, of the two, it is doubtful whether the mistress or the maid possessed the higher soul.

But, in the meanwhile, Mrs. Arundel did not neglect to derive every advantage that she could from her footing at the Court.

Mrs. Craven was entirely alone, and very anxious that the widow and her little daughter should take up their abode with her until Mr. Northland's return; but to this plan the latter lady could not consent.

"Dear Mrs. Craven, I will come over whenever you wish me to do so; I think nothing of the trouble; but mine is but a tiny household, and requires the eye of its mistress over it continually, lest things should go wrong."

And Mrs. Craven, in consequence, was only the more impressed with the excellency of her friend's domestic qualities, and the love she evinced for her home, and contented herself with pressing her to come to dinner every day, and for a drive every afternoon. And the mornings and evenings Mrs. Arundel devoted to the work she had in hand, which progressed favourably; and after Cecil Craven had again left Egham Priory and returned to his barracks at Aldershot, and Mrs. Craven (not feeling very strong after the summer weather) proposed spending a short time at the seaside, and asked the widow and little Emily

to accompany her there as her guests, Mrs. Arundel unhesitatingly acceded to the offer, with abundant thanks and expressions of gratitude for the kindness which had prompted it.

But before she left Laburnum Cottage under the charge of Caroline Wilson, the work she had set herself was accomplished, and three packets were lying in her private drawers, ready addressed and sealed. Two of them were merely bulky letters, directed to the mistress of Craven Court and the Countess of Riversdale, but the third, which was inscribed to Raymond Norreys, appeared to contain some enclosure; and all three addresses were written in a feigned hand, and rather a remarkable one.

"Mind, Caroline," was Mrs. Arundel's last words to her faithful servitor, "that you post those letters *in London* about a week hence, not earlier, and register the one for Mr. Norreys. Mrs. Craven's will be sent on to the Court, and forwarded from there to whatever address she may order her letters to be sent. But on no account let either of them out of your own

hands, and post them yourself. Now, *mind!* I depend upon you!"

"You may depend upon my doing as you say, ma'am," was the reply of Mrs. Wilson; "and I hope, if any harm comes of it (particularly with regard to Major Craven's stud, which Wilson knows of) that you will make it good to me with regard to him. "For, though I shan't be sorry to see Mrs. Norreys get into a scrape," she continued, sotto voce, and for her own edification alone, "I don't bear so much love to this one either, as all that comes to, when every offence of mine is likely to be visited by Wilson on the head of my girl. Oh! my dear girl, I wonder where she can be?—I'd cut off my right hand to do the creature a service as would bring her back safely to me again!"

CHAPTER XII.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

"Is that your maid's lover, Rachel, sneaking about outside the garden wall now?" inquired Raymond Norreys, returning suddenly to the house one evening just as he had quitted it, and addressing his wife—"a fellow in a drab-coloured greatcoat, with a black velvet collar; because if it is, I think I know him."

Rachel, in her wish to benefit Martha, by having some conclusive proof to put before her that the man who wrote, and walked, and made love to her, was not a proper acquaintance to pursue, had enlisted her husband in the cause, and asked him to try and find out what it was impossible she

could do herself, who the man, calling himself Tom White, was, and what his character and occupation; and, although Raymond had pooh-poohed the idea as Quixotic, and asked Rachel why she could not dismiss the woman at once, and have done with her, he had, nevertheless, kept his eyes open when he left and returned to the Abbey Lodge at night, on the chance of catching sight of the figure which was said to haunt its environs so often.

"I am sure I cannot tell," replied Rachel, speaking in a low voice, for this little business had been a secret between the husband and wife, and had drawn them closer together in familiar intercourse than anything had done yet; "I have never seen the man, you know, Raymond, but I can ask Martha. Describe him to me."

"A tall fellow, rather fair, with a reddish face, and dressed as I said before. If it is the man I mean, he has a scar on his forehead, across the eyebrow, where the hair has never grown. I do not know him by name, though I meet him pretty nearly every night at some place or other, and I

am almost certain the person I met just now was he, and that he recognised me also, for he shrunk away into the shadow as I passed him, and pulled his hat over his eyes. If I am right, Rachel, tell your maid from me to give him up, or leave the house, for he is a man no virtuous woman, high or low, should speak to."

"I will ask Martha directly," said Rachel, quite excited at her husband's news; "but it is no use your waiting, Raymond, if the man is gone."

"Nor if he were still there," rejoined her husband; "for it is no affair of mine—our business lies with her, and not him. However, I will tell you more about him to-morrow, and he left the house again as he spoke.

When Rachel summoned her maid that evening, and asked her hurriedly if the description that her master had given tallied with that of her acquaintance, mingling, as she put her series of questions, greatcoats and red complexions, black velvet collars and fair hair, in one breath—and winding up with the unanswerable

fact that the gentleman in question had a remarkable scar over his eyebrow, poor Martha could not bear up against such a weight of evidence, and immediately confessed that she thought the person mentioned must be Mr. Tom White, particularly as she had parted with him beneath the garden wall at the identical moment that she heard her master's step coming towards the iron gate.

"Then if that is the case, Martha, Mr. Norreys says that you must either give up his acquaintance or leave my service, for he is not a fit person for you to know; but I should be very sorry to lose you, Martha, all the same."

Of course Martha curtsied and cried, and said she was willing to do anything that was right and just, but that she could not help hoping that her master had made a mistake about the individuality of the man in question.

But when Raymond saw his wife on the next morning, he told her that he had made no such thing; that, although it was difficult to ascertain the man's real name (for gentle-

men are shy of letting themselves be known by their patronymics in places of doubtful resort), there was no doubt about his being the same that he had at first supposed him to be: that he was a great gambler and a great drunkard—a gentleman by birth, but not by manners—and a man of known habits of dissipation and most indifferent fame.

"You can repeat what I have told you to your maid, Rachel; but let her understand that it is a final decision on your part, for I am quite satisfied as to the character of her admirer, whatever she may be herself."

But when Rachel came to tell Martha the further particulars that her husband had ascertained, the girl's grief was so excessive, and her entreaties that Mrs. Norreys would not dismiss her from her service until she had allowed her to speak once more to him so urgent, that she had not the heart to make the decision final.

"Well, *once* more, Martha, then," she said—"only once more, and if you cannot satisfy yourself or me after that, we must really part."

"Indeed, ma'am!" exclaimed the poor girl, sobbing, "I wish to do what's right. I'm nearly heart-broken about it myself. I'd have slaved for him, and cared for him, and been turned out of every place I ever went to for his sake, if he had only been true to me; but if he's been telling me falsehoods, why, I think, it will kill my love for him outright only to come to the knowledge of such. But I can't quite believe it yet, ma'am; I can't bring myself to think so badly of him without further proofs."

Her mistress tried to soothe her, although she had no consolation to give her, and she readily agreed that Martha should go the next day, unbidden—for this one time only—to the rooms where she had once had an interview with Mr. White before, and try to wrest the truth from his own lips.

"And if I do that, ma'am," she said, in conclusion, "I shall be satisfied ever afterwards."

The rooms were at the other side of London, and the girl was gone some hours. When she returned, Rachel was surprised that she did not seek her presence to relate

the issue of her journey, but Martha never appeared. Going into her bedroom at dusk, her mistress perceived her busy over the contents of a chest of drawers.

"Well, Martha?" she said, interrogatively.

Her maid turned round upon her almost as if she were angry; certainly, as if she had received some insult, though not from Rachel's hands.

"Please don't speak to me of it, ma'am!" she exclaimed, passionately; "please never mention it again, or I shall go out of my mind."

"But I must know from yourself whether you are to remain in my service or not, Martha. You know the conditions."

The girl came towards her mistress, in the dusk, and fell upon her knees, sobbing bitterly.

"Yes; please, ma'am, if you will—for ever. You are the only one as ever I saw that seems to take any real interest in me. Who else should I go to? But please don't speak to me about it, or I shall die!"

And in the violence of her emotion, and

the working in her face occasioned by her wounded pride and betrayed feeling, Martha Wilson really looked as if she could be capable, under aggravation, of making away with herself. The mood of ill-concealed passion and dark remorse which seemed to possess her servant made Rachel timid, and she said no more to her that night. But the next day, when she had cooled down a little, Martha sought her mistress of her own accord, and told her all she wished to know. How when she went to the rooms of the man who had said he loved her, thus unexpectedly, she had met, not with him—not with reproaches—with cruel truths, or abuse—but with something much worse in her feminine ideas—with a woman, who had made it pretty plain to her, and in unvarnished language, who she was, and why she had a better right to be there than Martha herself.

"Not that I wished to stop one minute, ma'am, after I heard who she was," said the poor girl, proudly; "and I wouldn't enter those doors again, nor listen to what he has to say, by word or letter, for all the wealth

of India. But I thought I'd better write plainly and tell him what I feel; and please ma'am, I've got a few little trifles here as he gave me" (and here poor Martha produced a miscellaneous heap of presents, from a gaudy Paris shawl down to a gold locket and a photographic book), "and if you'd be kind enough to let me make them up into a parcel, with my letters, and take them this evening to the Parcels Delivery Office—I am thinking it's the last time I'll trouble you to give me leave to go walking for some weeks to come."

And then, as Rachel began to approve her resolution and to compassionate her for its necessity, Martha gave a tremendous gulp and said, whilst her full lips trembled—

"I'd rather never speak of it again, ma'am! please to forget as I ever kept company with any one—for I *did* love him very truly, and I must allow that he hasn't behaved as he should have done to me. I am very much obliged to you, ma'am, for all your kindness—but I know I can get over it, if I try—and I mean to do it." And with the same resolution, born of Pride,

which would have taken her unmoved to the gallows, Martha Wilson turned energetically upon her heel, and left the room, bearing her ill-fated presents with her.

But Rachel, with all her pity, was very elate at the success of her undertaking. She felt that this girl, in whom she took a lively interest, had been saved, perhaps from a fate worse than the gallows, and through her agency. She was anxious to communicate the determination that Martha Wilson had arrived at to her husband, who had also interested himself, for her sake, on her maid's behalf, and full of this intention she ran down stairs to find him. She was not disappointed, for he was in the dining-room, and alone,—apparently engaged in reading some letters which he had just received by the afternoon's post. As Rachel had flown down stairs, brimful of her good news, and feeling more than ordinarily brave after the success of her undertaking, the thought flashed through her mind that she might now find courage to tell Raymond that love-secret which was also oppressing her own heart.

"Now," she thought to herself, "will be a good opportunity, if he is alone—for he will look pleased at what I have to tell him (I know he will because he is so generous), and then I shall have to thank him, and whilst I thank him, surely it will not be so hard to say—'Dear Raymond, I love you —indeed I do.' Not if his eyes look kind as they did yesterday, I am sure it will not, and any way I will try; it is but a few words to say—and then it will be all over." Full of this great idea, Rachel burst almost breathless into the dining-room, and saw her husband as has been described, alone, and busied with his letters. He did not look up as she entered, but that was too trivial a circumstance for her to feel alarmed at, and she stepped towards him, her cheeks glowing like a rose, her bright eyes lighted up with intelligence and affection.

"Raymond!" she exclaimed, "I have something to tell you. I want to speak to you."

He raised his eyes then—and encountering her graceful little figure and excited face, he gave a heavy sigh and rose to con-

front her. But when his glance met Rachel's, she felt her own grow dull and misty; for his was cooler, sterner, and more distant than she had ever seen it look before.

"I also want to speak to you," he said, with a grand displeasure in his voice. "By this afternoon's post I received this letter —and I want your explanation of its contents." And as he spoke, he threw two or three separate sheets of paper upon the table, and a tiny packet amongst them tied up in cotton wool and cardboard.

Rachel looked at them and him in blank amazement.

"Raymond," she exclaimed, hurriedly, "What do you mean—what have I to do with these letters, or they with me? who wrote them?"

"Of that, perhaps, you will be the better able to judge after you have examined them," he continued, coldly. "I have no knowledge on the subject, and no wish to ascertain any. All that I am desirous of hearing is your denial of their contents;" and he took up a newspaper and pretended

to read it, with the intention of proving that he was perfectly at his ease, but in reality to hide the rapid changes which were taking place in his countenance.

Rachel Norreys felt that she was the subject of some accusation, but had no idea of what. The very knowledge though, that Raymond considered there was a doubt of her being able to refute the charge brought against her (whatever it might be), brought all her natural pride, heightened by the consciousness of her own innocence, to her aid, and she advanced towards the table where the papers lay with a bearing that was eminently haughty.

"If the contents consist of any imputations against me hitherto unknown to yourself," she said, indignantly, "I can deny them before I know what they are."

His face, hidden by the large sheet of newspaper, assumed a look of triumph as he heard her words, but he merely answered—

"Be so good as to read them first, Rachel, and we will discuss the truth of them afterwards;" and applied himself afresh to his reading.

And then, with one wounded look at the newspaper, of mingled love and indignation, Rachel took the letters in her hand and commenced to peruse them. But the first paper she glanced at she let fall again upon the table with a cry of half horror and half fear. At that sound the face behind the newspaper blanched with its distress, but Raymond neither moved nor spoke. The words which had so appalled Rachel were headed "copy," and ran thus :—

"Jack saw Harris at orderly hour this morning, and heard the bad news. How my heart bleeds for you, my dearest girl. But you are a naughty little puss to run to Master Cecil Craven for consolation. I have no doubt he was an *immense comfort* to you, and that he found a certain lady's bedroom a very pleasant billet, but that's a sort of game you mustn't play at too often, Miss Rachel, or you'll find it dangerous. I shouldn't be at all surprised myself if Master C. C. presents himself at the window to-morrow morning again, armed with a fresh stock of consolation. You sly puss!"

And here the "copy" ended.

She caught it up again and looked at it, and let it drop, when she had mastered its contents, without a word except the low exclamation of "My God!" which escaped her lips when she had finished it. She had turned deadly pale though during the process, and as she reached forth her hand for another sheet of paper, it trembled visibly. She knew it would contain some fresh charge against her, for the whole of the injury intended had flashed through her quick understanding directly she had seen of what the first was a transcription; but just then her head was too giddy, her heart too troubled, herself altogether taken too much by surprise, to have time to stop and think who was her enemy.

The next paper she examined was in her husband's handwriting, and was part of a torn and disregarded letter—

"I shall write to you—
and that when we next
right than I have now to sign myself,
"Your devoted husband,
"Raymond Norreys."

"What is this folly all about?" she said; finding her tongue when the foregoing scrap had passed through her hands. "This is simply part of a torn letter that some one, God knows why, must have extracted from my waste-paper basket months ago. It is one of your old letters, Raymond."

"I know it," he replied, shortly.

The next piece of writing that she examined was not so easily recognised by her. It was a letter written in a coarse and unfamiliar hand, and purported to be addressed to Raymond Norreys from a friend; but it bore no signature or date, and was indited on a common sheet of note-paper. Rachel turned it over and over, as if she was trying to guess at its transcriber, before she set herself to read it through. It was as follows :—

"To Mr. Norreys.

"Sir,—This comes from a Friend. Don't take Mrs. Norreys to Craven Court too often, and if you wish to know the reason of my warning, ask her yourself, if (when you were away, and she was with the regi-

ment in Gibraltar) Major Craven was not in the habit of going into her bedroom, of kissing her, calling her by her Christian name, and otherwise misbehaving himself. If she denies it, show her the enclosed note and gold stud; the one was addressed to herself, the other was found beneath her bed. I need not say to whom it belonged, as it bears his monogram. To prove that I have a right to warn you, and am telling the truth, I send a piece of one of your own letters found thrown away by her hand. Major Craven is about to marry a noble young lady, which, under these circumstances, is not right, so I have taken the liberty of apprizing the Countess of Riversdale and also Mrs. Craven of the above facts.

"I am, sir, yours, etc.,

"A Well-wisher."

The handwriting of the foregoing epistle was so formal and unlike that of an educated person, and at the same time the phraseology was so correct, that Rachel, coupling both circumstances with the facts mentioned, had no hesitation in fixing the deed of darkness

upon the shoulders of Caroline Wilson, particularly as the woman's dislike of herself was so well known. She was *very very* white when she had finished reading the words of the "Well-wisher," but she summoned sufficient courage to untie next the little packet of card and cotton wool, from which fell Cecil's gold stud, with his monogram, C. C., deeply and plainly cut into the metal. She had been already too much shocked and astonished by what she had become acquainted with to feel any fresh surprise at its appearance.

"How strange!" she murmured to herself, as she took it up and examined it, remembering the circumstances under which it had been lost, "how very strange! It can come from no other than that fiend, Caroline Wilson." And then apparently remembering that her husband was waiting for her explanation of these facts, she turned towards him hastily. "Raymond, you do not believe what this letter insinuates?"

"I believe nothing as yet, Rachel. I only wait for your denial to utterly disbelieve the whole. Is it true, or not?"

"What?" she said, with an increasing agitation, as she remembered that she could not deny the stubborn facts, however false the deduction drawn from them.

"That note," continued Raymond. "Did you ever receive one like it?"

"Yes, from Elise—we wrote to each other constantly. This is a copy of one of hers."

"But the allusion in it—to—to—Craven —what truth is there in that?"

"None that I need be ashamed of," said Rachel, more boldly, as she saw the necessity for boldness. "It is true that Cecil Craven *did* come into my bedroom when I was very unhappy about my father's illness; but Elise made a great deal more out of the circumstance than it was worth."

"Was that stud found beneath your bed, Rachel?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I have not seen it since the day that Major Craven lost it."

"It is his, then?"

She bowed her head in silence. An intense horror was creeping over her as

the unanswerable nature of the evidence gathered against her innocence broke upon her mind.

"Where was it lost?"

"In my room. At the same time I spoke of before."

"Has Craven ever kissed you, Rachel?" She made no reply, but coloured visibly. "Will you answer me?" exclaimed Raymond, rising, and throwing away his newspaper.

"Sometimes," she faltered.

"*Sometimes!*" he shouted. "Good Heavens, do you dare to stand there and tell me '*sometimes*,' as if sometimes were nothing? Am I to understand that that man has been in your bedroom, has kissed you, has called you 'Rachel,' and that your names have been pulled through the dirt together?"

"If you knew all——," she commenced.

"If I knew all," he returned. "I do know all. I have seen that man's arm around your waist with my own eyes; I have heard rumours of your intimacy with him from the first day that I rejoined you—rumours

that I would not credit without the evidence of my own senses; but I see it all now as clear as the light of God's day. Why was I such a fool as not to have seen it before? This is the secret of the pleasant greeting you prepared for me on my arrival! This is the reason of your disquietude—your melancholy—your unfulfilled wifehood! I see it all!"

"No, no!" she cried; "it is not so—you are mistaken, Raymond!"

"What is it then?" he answered. "Explain it away if you can. What is the problem of your interest in this man?" She could not speak. She shivered beneath the inward knowledge that she *must* not speak. "Explain it if you can," he repeated, in a voice of thunder, "or, by Heavens, consider everything at an end between us."

"Raymond," she said, and although her body trembled her voice was firm, "I cannot deny what these letters assert to be the truth. I see that I am caught in a terrible net, woven by some enemy of yours or mine, and there appears no means of escape for

me. But my lips are sealed. I am bound by an oath, and I must not tell you, what (if I could) would clear all your suspicions away directly. Cecil Craven has never made love to me—of that be certain. But it is all that I can tell you."

"Not made love to you!" exclaimed her husband. "How dare you say so, when by your own account he has kissed you, loitered in your bedroom—(Good God! that I should live to hear it!)—and his attentions been remarked by all the regiment. And it is not the first time, mind you, that I have heard rumours of this. Rachel, you must deny it, or you must not. I will have no betwixt and between in such a matter."

"I *cannot* deny it," she said, mournfully, and her attitude of despair had assumed so much the appearance of a consciousness of undisputable guilt, that her husband was misled by it.

"You *cannot* deny it," he repeated slowly. "You—the wife (or intended so to be) of an honourable man—cannot deny that in his absence (an absence during which, so help me Heaven, Rachel, I lived for you alone)

you admitted a stranger to such familiar intercourse with yourself, that his unstained name (that you unworthily bore) was branded by the lookers-on, and linked with another's. You cannot deny that your lips (those lips which you should have kept sacred to myself) have been polluted by another man's touch, and that such an occurrence was so common as to be known amongst your household. As soon as you saw these letters you guessed they came from Mrs. Wilson. You were evidently aware that even your father's servants knew of your disgrace."

"My father himself knew of my intimacy with Cecil Craven, and approved of it," said Rachel, proudly. "I can say no more to you in my defence than that, Raymond."

"Oh, hush!" he exclaimed; "be silent. Don't try to lay upon the shoulders of the dead a fault which is yours alone. I know your father to have been an honest man, Rachel; would I could think the same of you as a woman."

Here his voice broke down, and the miserable sound overcame the girl, in her

state of agitation and distress. And she had run down stairs that evening with so different a hope—so great an expectation from this interview with her husband which was ending so sadly for them both.

"Raymond!" she screamed, as the signs of his emotion met her ear, and rushed almost into his very arms as she spoke. "Raymond, don't believe it, for God's sake don't believe it; it is not true! I never loved him as you think. I never loved a man in that way except yourself, and that but lately. You said that you would only hear it from my own lips, and I have been too foolish yet to tell you; but I *do* love you, Raymond, and I was coming down this very afternoon to tell you so, when you were reading those horrible letters. Oh, Raymond, I *love you!* Believe it, if you will, or not; I love you only, and I will be your faithful wife henceforward if you will only have it so." And Rachel's agitation and excitement gave way beneath a torrent of tears, half occasioned by her grief, half by her shame.

At any other time Raymond Norreys

would have leapt with joy to hear those long-wished-for words bursting with so much mingled modesty and love from Rachel's trembling lips, and even now a flush of pleasure mounted to his dark forehead, which seemed for the moment almost to wipe out the remembrance of his impending misery. But only for a moment. In the next, he thought upon his wrong, and put her from him.

"Once more; will you deny the charge against you, Rachel?"

"I cannot deny," she repeated, sadly. "What I have already said is true."

And then his transitory flush of pleasure died away, and he only remembered that the woman before him had once been false, and was probably false again. Her avowal of love for himself was only a piece of feminine acting, an artful ruse to turn away his anger and his accusation from her, and by taking advantage of his weakness, to shield herself from the consequences of her crime.

Else, why had the confession been delayed till now? And, thinking thus, he

flung himself away from her, and exclaimed impetuously—

"Then come no more with your false tales of love for me, and me only; when to deny this accusation would be so foul a lie, that even your double nature revolts from it. You have deceived me, Rachel, grossly and most unwarrantably deceived me, and I trust your words no more. You have laid yourself open to the worst suspicions, and to having them made public: you have for ever closed all intimacy with the Cravens for us, and raised up a barrier between yourself and me which will take a weary while to break down again. Go! I'll have none of your love; I want none of it: keep it for the next man that thinks it worth his while to receive it at your hands."

Rachel stood paralysed. She had betrayed her cherished secret. She had told this man, her husband, after a mighty effort, that she *loved* him, and he had spurned her love—refused it—stung and insulted her into the bargain.

This girl was proud by nature, and self-willed, and dominant. She had not been

used to stoop to offer, still less to be refused; and although the worst phases of her character had lately been kept in abeyance (not only by the melancholy turn her mind had taken, but also by her growing love for Raymond), they were only so kept, not uprooted. And now they came into full force and action. Rachel Norreys in her everyday mood was an uncertain creature to deal with; but Rachel Norreys, roused as she was now, by the man she had learnt almost to worship, was a Fury—not a woman. Despised, rejected, cast out from his embrace, to tell her love for whom she had made so great a struggle! She could scarcely understand such treatment, and understanding it, she could not bear it. With fire flashing from her irradiated eyes, with her delicate nostrils distended, and her tender hands clenched upon one another, she confronted Raymond Norreys, and forced him to listen to her. Her words were few, but she said them almost as solemnly as if she knew they were to be her last.

"Raymond, tell me all the truth. Of *what* do you suspect me?"

"God knows," he answered, passionately. "I don't know myself where suspicion ends and certainty commences;" and gathering up the scattered papers as he spoke, he left the room.

She looked after him for a few moments as if she had been turned to marble, the heavy breathing which lifted the folds across her bosom being the only signs of life she gave. And when he had left her presence and the house (as she could hear him shortly do), Rachel walked deliberately upstairs to her bedroom and assumed her walking garb. She was permitted to do so undisturbed, for Martha Wilson had gone to the office with her parcel, and her mother and sister-in-law were out for their usual drive. And then she took her purse out of her pocket and mechanically counted its contents.

Yes, there was plenty there for her purpose. She had always a liberal supply of money accorded her by Raymond. When she had finished her preparations, she deliberately turned to leave the house. The one great pervading idea in her mind being

that she would no longer bear his name, nor eat his bread, nor live beneath his roof, whilst this great stigma lay upon her head, and that she must seek those who could remove it from her, and if they refused to do so, she would die. But she could not carry out her purpose altogether so bravely as she had first intended.

"Suspected," she said to herself, to raise her courage as she descended the staircase, "suspected of all wrong, and openly rejected, and by Raymond, whilst I, with oath-bound lips, am powerless to cry out or save myself!"

"Oh, father! would that you had died before you spoke, and buried your cruel secret with you in the grave. Oh, Raymond!" she added, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, as she passed the oaken doors, and knew that the next minute would see her beyond the iron portals, which she might never again cross—"Oh, Raymond! dearest love (who could have been scarce dearer as my husband), God for ever protect and keep you, though you should never know my innocence, or we

two meet again!" And then with a low, stifled cry of "Father, would we were together!" Rachel Norreys passed, without further comment or warning, from the gates of her husband's home, into the stream of mingled life which flows along the streets of the Great City.

END OF VOL. II.

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